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# OLD MAN'S BEARD



"A figure whose right of presence I instantly  
and passionately questioned."

*The Turn of the Screw.*

"Treat all supernatural beings with respect,  
but keep aloof from them—then you may  
be called wise."

CONFUCIUS.

"I have heard, but not believed, the spirits  
of the dead may walk again."

. . . . .

. . . . .

. . . . .

*(Exit, pursued by a bear.)*

ANTIGONUS.

# OLD MAN'S BEARD

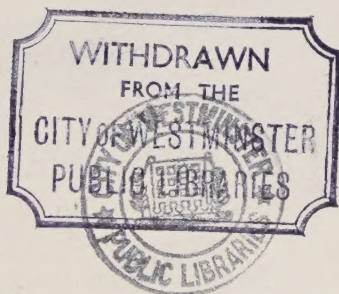
*Fifteen Disturbing Tales*

BY

H. R. WAKEFIELD

Author of

"THEY RETURN AT EVENING," etc.



Geoffrey Bles      Suffolk St., Pall Mall

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## CONTENTS

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	PAGE
OLD MAN'S BEARD . . . . .	I
THE LAST TO LEAVE . . . . .	35
THE CAIRN . . . . .	49
PRESENT AT THE END . . . . .	69
"LOOK UP THERE!" . . . . .	89
"WRITTEN IN OUR FLESH" . . . . .	109
BLIND MAN'S BUFF . . . . .	129
A COINCIDENCE AT HUNTON . . . . .	139
NURSE'S TALE . . . . .	161
THE DUNE . . . . .	175
UNREHEARSED . . . . .	193
A JOLLY SURPRISE FOR HENRI . . . . .	213
THE RED HAND . . . . .	241
SURPRISE ITEM . . . . .	255
A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY . . . . .	267



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*OLD MAN'S BEARD*

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## OLD MAN'S BEARD

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MR. BICKLEY almost precisely satisfies our American friends' definition of a "Regular Fellar." That is to say, he makes an article of commerce, and by selling it at seven times its cost of production has prospered greatly. Mr. Bickley has merely super-tax worries. He is a good "mixer"—he knows sixty-three persons by their Christian names: he is always ready to talk golf shop, with particular reference to a gross eighty-seven he once "shot" on a short course burnt to a cinder. He makes almost exactly the same slice off the first tee twice on Saturday and twice on Sunday, and can stow away several rounds of drinks without becoming unduly pugnacious, verbose or pleased with himself. He goes to and from the City in a big car and smokes a big cigar during the process. And so on and so on. But he slightly diverges from type in two respects; he quite frequently reads a book that has neither been written by Mr. Edgar Wallace nor recommended to him for its candid treatment of the Sex Question, and he hasn't got quite the orthodox Regular Fellar's life partner. Mrs. Bickley is a bit of an enigma to the other R. F.'s. Sometimes

they are reassured that she is just what she ought to be—a “lovely little woman,” again in our American friends’ idiom—the adjective being a tribute to her character rather than her physical charms, though these are still considerable. But at other times the R. F.’s have an unpalatable impression that she would like to take them by the shoulders and drown them in deep water. And then they are rather afraid of her and very sorry for Mr. Bickley. As a matter of fact her mother was an Hungarian and temperamental, one who found even the Buda-Pesth variety of R. F. so desperately, irredeemably deadly that none such ventured for long into her presence. She had been the Perfect Mistress in her youth, a Perfect Wife to an Englishman of high intelligence in her middle age, and a formidable and indomitable old woman. In her daughter these characteristics were strongly diluted by Anglo-Saxon tolerance and phlegm; though sufficient of the fiery spirit remained to save her from becoming just a British Female Yawn. She was an avid but virtuous flirt in her youth, she is at present a perfect wife for an Englishman of no particular intelligence, and in her old age she will probably be a bit of an autocrat and a nuisance. And there are still to be found traces of that scarifying old mother of hers; sudden sharp explosions caused by boredom; quick, short-lived ardours for good-looking men with



brains—though she meets very few—and apparently causeless fits of temper, so uncontrollable and uncompromising that poor Mr. Bickley—that nice little man—has always urgently watched the temperamental development of his daughter and only child, Mariella, for symptoms of that dangerous and irregular Mittel-European strain. And, though they are still further diluted, they are there. She is all right in many respects. She is physically flawless and saved from being merely the ordinary, full-blooded, smooth-skinned, regular-featured *Daily Mirror* bathing belle by a delicate upward slant of her eyelids, and a certain indefinable but captivating “chic,” by an air of slightly exotic breeding and an absolute incapacity for giggling at little odd erotic moments. Again, though she is as intellectually incurious as a portable wireless set she is as sexually inquisitive as a curate, and in Mr. Bickley’s opinion she knew *What Every Young Girl Ought To Know* much sooner than any young girl ought to know it. At the age of fifteen she had driven the chauffeur—a most high-minded young man—almost out of his mind by the warmth of her feelings towards him, and when they were discovered together by Mrs. Bickley he had spilled indignant protests all over the garage where Mariella had neatly cornered him. After this infatuation faded, she had experienced a succession of hurried, hot passions for a number of

hopelessly ineligible youths, so that Mr. Bickley, with a meanness only excused by his desperation, once upbraided her mother for introducing this culpable and devilish strain into the staid and seemly Bickley stock. Whereupon, the Old Lady being in the ascendant, he got about five times as good as he gave and spent a restless night composing a dignified letter to *The Times* on the dangers of mixed marriages.

And then came that most desired return to Bickleyism, for Mariella accepted the hand—the in every way desirable hand—of young Arthur Randall. Six weeks before it hadn't been desirable at all, for then he had been extremely impecunious, and merely—or so at least it appeared—a superlative player of games. Mariella had seen him make eighty-four runs against Larwood, Barratt and Staples when the dust was flying, and beat three men in succession to score the winning try against Wales, and as the applause rose and towered she had made up her mind, and prepared herself for a long and fiercely contested battle with her father. And then Arthur's uncle suddenly slipped his anchor, leaving his nephew £80,000! This timely and unexpected event eased the situation completely, and Mariella was soon flourishing a solitaire diamond ring and the wedding was fixed for the end of October. The beginning of August found them all

installed in a well-appointed furnished house at that aristocratic resort, Brinton-on-Sea, which Mr. Bickley had rented for seven weeks.

This confinement within four walls gave Mr. Bickley a not too earnestly desired opportunity of scrutinising the character of his prospective son-in-law, so far as that young gentleman permitted him to do so. Physically he was beyond criticism. Tall, lithe and dark he had exceptional vitality and perfect health. He was a joy to look upon, and the fact that he had stood up to the Notts fast bowlers for two hours, and had picked their short ones off his nose and plunked them up against the square-leg boundary was sufficient evidence of his courage and pugnacity, as was that vicious "hand-off" which had turned the Welsh full-back turtle and given him a very sore jaw-bone for a week. It would have been very soothing to have been able to couple these moral qualities and physical attributes with £80,000 and find nothing more to scrutinise. But Mr. Bickley reluctantly and irritably nosed up something else; something enigmatic, elusive, buried so deep, as it were, that Mr. Bickley felt his nose was only long enough to unearth its fringes and vague outline. What was it? Well, it sometimes revealed itself in sudden and most unexpected flashes of brutal, ruthless insight, almost a devilish sort of flourished egoism, most singular in so usually

commonplace a master of moving spheres and ovals. Yet was he ever quite commonplace? Wasn't that orthodox exterior possibly a very cunningly adjusted mask? Unpleasant questions which Mr. Bickley reprimanded his mind for asking about his prospective son-in-law. Yet they had some justification. For example, on one occasion they had all been sitting on the beach and he had been reading out from the *Daily Express* an account of the lamentable defalcations of a former business acquaintance, with appropriate comments. And then young Randall had suddenly stared into his face with a most ironical and piercing expression and said, "There, but for a spot of caution and the grace of Old Nick, went Horace Bickley." Which was exceedingly rude and he hoped unjustified. It had taken him very much aback, though both Mariella and her mother had seemed amused. And then again, when they had been discussing a peculiarly unpleasant murder of a young woman by a solicitor's clerk, and marvelling how he could have brought himself to commit such an atrocity, young Randall had remarked with frigid detachment, "She probably bored him, and if by slitting her gullet he prevented her from boring anyone else, I consider he did a service to Society." He said something unexpected and in bad taste like that quite often. Did he mean such things? He certainly appeared to. So he couldn't be quite

ordinary. Was that a good or a bad thing? Well, Mariella wasn't quite ordinary either. All those difficult, adolescent tendencies, now so pleasantly dormant, that her foreign blood explained but didn't eliminate, and other little signs here and there showed she had a slight streak of some kind. Perhaps their prospects of marital happiness would be increased by the fact that each was slightly peculiar, and certainly it was most reassuring that young Randall seemed so utterly devoted to Mariella, fiercely and fanatically so, and she seemed to have concentrated at last in a sort of smouldering and unvarying way.

Mr. Bickley had waded his way through the evidence to a fairly favourable summing-up when something else came to worry him. Mariella didn't seem very flourishing. The family G. P. had described her as the most flawless physical specimen he had ever examined, and the sun and sea and air of Brinton should have put the keenest edge on this brilliant Toledo blade, and the close presence of her lover should have made her spirit leap within her. But the actual result was depressingly different. After the first few days she seemed limp and lethargic and "snappy" in the mornings. She shook this off during the day, but began to droop again at sundown and showed a marked distaste for going to bed; not a distaste born of overmastering vitality, but something less reassuring than that, something less



readily explicable. Her mother had noticed it, of course, and was rather worried, had questioned her gently and been testily repulsed.

Look at her now, for example, just come in from bathing on such a glorious day, and young Randall gazing at her with such undisguised adoration. What more could she want? Yet she seemed shadowed, brooding over something. She really almost looked ill and yet, in a purely physical sense, radiantly healthy—it must be some mental trouble; but what conceivable reason could there be for it? Yes, she was looking in that way worse than he'd ever seen her look, worse even than when he'd kicked that ghastly young dancing partner creature down the steps at home. It then occurred to Mr. Bickley that his old friend, Sir Perseus Farrar, had just arrived at the Royal Hotel, and that he was the greatest authority in Europe on that awful and occult business, the female nervous system. How Mr. Bickley admired a man who had the audacity to make a living out of delving into that monstrous region, that scarifying inferno! He knew it was the unforgivable sin to consult members of the medical profession out of office hours, and specially while on holiday, but Sir Perseus was such an old friend and kindly person and so fond of Mariella that he'd risk it, if she didn't get better. So far from getting better she burst into hysterical tears in the middle of

breakfast the very next morning, ran up to her bedroom, locked the door and refused to see anyone. So Mr. Bickley trotted round to the Royal. He found Sir Perseus smoking in the lounge, and forthwith burst into a halting recital concerning Mariella, liberally studded with apologies. These Sir Perseus cut short. "My dear Horace," he said, "I was just thinking when you came in how glad I should be to have a little work to do. I'm always like that after a week's idling, and though I am very sorry that that which will rescue me from my sloth is some trouble with my dear and exquisite Mariella, I don't suppose there's much wrong, and if I can set it right, I shall feel doubly grateful to you for allowing me to don my harness for an hour or two. I'll drop in casually after lunch." Which he did, and Mariella came out of her seclusion to greet him. By arrangement Mrs. Bickley and young Randall had gone out before his arrival, and very soon Mr. Bickley found an excuse to absent himself. Sir Perseus was not a famous authority on the female nervous system for nothing, and within a quarter of an hour Mariella was telling him something to which he was listening with an absorbed and authoritative attention. At the end of half an hour he began to ask questions, and at the end of an hour he patted her hand and told her there was nothing seriously to fuss about, but that unless she objected he would like her to put herself in his

hands, by which he meant that she should tell him at once anything else which happened, and confide absolutely in him. She agreed thankfully. And then he left her with a very puzzled and thoughtful expression on his face and, as arranged, met Mr. Bickley on the front.

They sat down on a seat overlooking the sea, on which Sir Perseus stared for a time, while Mr. Bickley waited rather anxiously for him to speak.

"I don't think it's anything at all serious," said Sir Perseus at length, "but very unpleasant for her, poor child. It's a nightmare she's been having. I asked her if she were accustomed to dream, and she replied with great candour that ever since she could remember she had dreamed frequently and vividly of young men."

Mr. Bickley shuffled on his seat, his thoughts winging back. "I suppose," he said, "that's quite usual, quite natural? I mean, most young girls dream of young men."

"Oh, quite, quite," replied Sir Perseus; "but I gather that her dreams have been exceptionally, well—vivid. I was relieved to hear it, for it makes the deep etching of this nightmare less hard to explain. Apparently she experienced it for the first time ten days ago—on the second evening she was here. She has had it twice since. It takes this form. As she relates it, her room appears to be divided into

two parts; that in which she herself is in is darkness, the rest of the room is highly lighted. In it there is a bed, rather a big bed, and on it is an old man with a longish, grey beard wearing a night-shirt. He is apparently writhing in great agony. He is twisting over and over, his hands to his heart, his head flung back. And then he suddenly rolls over and drops from the bed to the floor and is hidden from her. Then the light seems to spread towards her across the carpet, and she sees between the bed and where she is placed a coffin on the ground. And it seems to her as though there must be many cracks in this coffin, for long grey hair is streaming through it, some coiled over the lid and some streaming upwards. And presently the lid starts slowly to rise, and then the whole room is in darkness, and she has the impression that something is moving towards her and then bending over her, and she feels something spreading over her face—hair, she thinks; she has a sensation of suffocation, and awakes."

"My God!" cried Mr. Bickley. "That is foul, dreadful! Poor little girl, what a bestial, terrifying experience!"

"Yes," replied Sir Perseus, "it is one of the most disgusting and unnerving dreams of the kind I have ever had described to me. There must be some explanation of it. Recurrent nightmares of this type are invariably the echo—stored in the sub-

conscious—of some sharp experience once upon a time recorded. That sounds obscure, and it is so, but I have known very many such cases. Can you recall anything in Mariella's short existence which, when regurgitated, as it were, might cause this beastly dream; anything to do with a grey-bearded man, for example? "

" Nothing whatever," said Mr. Bickley, emphatically. " I have certainly come across grey-bearded men in the course of business and so on, but I cannot remember that Mariella ever met one." (" But what a lot of men Mariella has taken to," he thought to himself. " It is conceivable there *was* one with a grey beard, but it is excessively improbable.")

" I stress the detail of the beard," continued Sir Perseus, " because it seems to be the *hair* which sharply dominates this dream, and chiefly disturbs Mariella's mind; for example, when she broke down at breakfast it was because, so she told me, she saw someone with a grey beard pass by the window, which shows how sensitive she is to, and preoccupied by, the hair element. And I am convinced that she must have had some shock—long ago quite possibly—connected with a person so adorned, and that this vile dream is a throw-back to this experience. I have told her to sift her memory for something of the kind. I am interested in her case, not only for

professional reasons—I am very fond of her—and I feel it is up to me to exorcise this horror. She is too young and too innocent to be made a victim of such devilry. She has agreed to put herself in my hands and consult me at once if there are any developments. I will send her a sleeping draught, and I suggest she should not sleep alone. She had better have her mother with her in the same room, also a night-light, and try to give her as amusing and *tiring* a day as possible.”

“I certainly will,” said Mr. Bickley, “and I’m deeply grateful to you for taking up the case—if that isn’t too alarming a way of putting it. She shall sleep in our room and I’ll move into hers. But, good heavens, if I thought as I got into bed I was doomed to have that dream, I should never dare to close my eyes!”

“Remember this,” said Sir Perseus; “if you actually had such a dream it would not seem quite as dreadful as you expected it to be; that is an axiom of human experience. It is not quite as shocking to Mariella as you think it must be. Nevertheless, it is loathsome enough, and therefore we’ve got to be very gentle and swift-witted with her. Oh, these dreams—how often I’ve puzzled over them! I’ve always firmly maintained they were distorted echoes of reality, though I know there is a school which regards them as nothing of the sort, but as reflections



from another mode of consciousness, so that they can be prophetic—more than that—definitely another existence as it were, so much so that if the dreaming faculty was fostered to its highest voltage, waking up might be equivalent to slipping into dreamland, and sinking into dreamland really waking up; but that is too hard a saying for my old cranium to digest. But the land of dreams is largely an unexplored terrain, or anyway unsuccessfully mapped and surveyed, and Mariella's case sharply reminds me of it. And now I must be off, my dear Horace. Don't worry, we will make her once more as sweetly light-hearted and fancy-free as she deserves to be."

When Mr. Bickley got back to the house Mariella had gone to lie down, but her mother and young Randall were awaiting him. He retailed to them a brief résumé of what Sir Perseus had told him. Mrs. Bickley had one admirable trait; in moments of crisis she acted first and talked afterwards, though most certainly she talked afterwards! So with hardly a word she bustled off to see about the change of rooms and the purchase of night-lights. Compared with young Randall's reception of the news hers seemed almost callous and unfeeling. For he became highly agitated and upset to an extent that slightly surprised Mr. Bickley, for surely it wasn't as bad as all that! Young Randall went very white, and cross-examined him closely and urgently concerning



the details of Mariella's nightmare, and seemed more and more distressed at every additional detail of it. As if such minutiae made any great difference, wondered Mr. Bickley. How very much in love with her he must be ! He felt compelled to impress on him that they must all do as Sir Perseus had decreed and keep Mariella's spirits up and her mind off her trouble as much as possible, and so on ; but young Randall hardly seemed to be listening to these excellent platitudes, and if he hadn't been drinking a good deal when he came down to dinner, Mr. Bickley was no judge of the earlier stages of intoxication. Mariella, on the other hand, seemed better, and the doctor's visit had restored her confidence. And this was justified, for under the influence of the sleeping-draught she enjoyed ten hours of dreamless slumber and was very glad to have her mother by her side and a tiny light shining between them. The next morning she was in excellent spirits and once more keenly appreciative of those glances of masculine admiration and feminine envy which she always evoked as she slipped her wrap from her shoulders and stepped slowly down the beach to the sea. She was—and still is for that matter—five feet nine inches and a half in height, magnificently "marshalled." The peculiar beauty of her figure is due to the fact that while she seems very long from hip to knee, she is one inch longer from knee to foot,

and her torso, rippling, taut and beautifully developed, is just exactly proportionately right. When the critical eye of the Brinton visitor turned from her perfection to the many other "very good figures" on the beach, their slight but recognisable flaws seemed brutally intensified. And then those tantalisingly lifted eyelids! Well, young Randall was deemed a damned lucky dog so soon to have all those rare felicities to sample. Yet on that occasion he didn't look as if he sufficiently appreciated the fact. He looked morose and hardly said a word. "A thick night or a tiff" surmised the knowing onlookers.

Sir Perseus looked in during the afternoon and professed himself quite satisfied with the patient. And for forty-eight hours he had every reason to be. But three nights later Mrs. Bickley woke up suddenly and looked across to Mariella. She was lying on her back and moving about with a slight incessant restlessness. "Shall I wake her?" thought her mother. "No, I'll wait a little while, it may be nothing." Presently Mariella's motions became more rapid, pronounced and urgent. And then she sat up in bed and began thrusting with her hands, and then brushing her face as if to free it from something which was spreading over it. This impressed her mother very horribly, and she jumped out of bed and went over to her, spoke her name, and

touched her gently. And presently she awoke, her eyes staring, her body trembling. And then she burst into tears. Her mother gave her a sleeping-draught, stroked her hair and comforted her, and took her to her own bed. Soon her sobbing became less violent and, as the drug allied itself with her exhaustion, she fell into a deep sleep. Mrs. Bickley, however, didn't close her eyes again that night. Early next morning she rang up Sir Perseus, who was vaguely reassuring. "Whatever the cause," he said, "it cannot be expected that complete recovery can be immediate." For the present he ordered a sleeping-draught every night.

Mariella seemed listless but fairly cheerful and, after her bathe, almost her usual self. Mr. Bickley was worried, but succeeded in disguising the fact. Young Randall was told nothing about it. And then there was another three days' pause and everyone's spirits rose again.

Mariella's temperament demanded a certain amount of solitude. She had found a very secluded spot wherein to rest and read in the afternoons, and she liked to go there alone after tea for a while. It was beside a grove about half a mile from the house. She used to go there in her bathing dress and have a dip just before going back to change for dinner.

On the fourth day after her bad night she strolled down there about five o'clock. Randall

and her father were playing golf, and Mrs. Bickley was busy with the laundry. Mariella usually returned about half-past six, but on this occasion a quarter-past seven struck and still she had not appeared.

"We'd better go and fetch her," said Mr. Bickley to young Randall. "She may have gone to sleep." He tried to keep all trace of uneasiness out of his voice, but each knew the other was anxious as they walked at top speed towards that cosy little spot under the shelter of the groin. What they saw when they reached it made young Randall leap recklessly down the fifteen feet from the sea-wall to the beach, while Mr. Bickley ran for the steps. For Mariella lay sprawled down the shingle. Her beach cloak had draped itself over her head so that only her legs were visible. Her book lay where she had flung it, almost at the water's edge. Young Randall pulled back the cloak. Her face was dead white and she was unconscious. He dashed down to the sea, soaked his handkerchief and squeezed the water over Mariella's face, but she showed no sign of recovery. "We must carry her back," said Mr. Bickley. By good fortune a taxi was passing just as they got her to the top of the steps, and three minutes later she was lying on her bed and Mr. Bickley was telephoning to Sir Perseus. He was in, and the taxi was sent to fetch him. Meanwhile

Mrs. Bickley and young Randall were busy with restoratives and hot-water bottles.

Mariella was just conscious but quite dazed when Sir Perseus arrived. After a few hurried words with Mr. Bickley he went upstairs and asked to be left alone with his patient. Half an hour later he left her in charge of her mother and came downstairs. He was looking grave as he joined the two men in the study. Though he had something else almost monopolising his mind, the attention of his expert eye was fleetingly seized by the appearance of young Randall, who was looking almost as ill as his young woman, he thought.

"Well," he said, "the bare facts are these. Mariella was resting against the breakwater and reading, when she felt something tickling her neck. She paid no heed for a while, and then the irritation became more insistent. She looked round casually and, according to her account, streamers of grey hair were flowing through the cracks in the woodwork and coiling round her neck. She remembers nothing more." Young Randall poured himself out half a tumbler of neat whisky and drained it.

"What is it? What is it?" cried Mr. Bickley desperately.

"It is, to put it crudely, an hallucination," replied Sir Perseus, "and I will not disguise from you the fact that it is a serious matter. A nightmare is one

thing, a violent waking illusion of this kind quite another. I must tell you one thing. She says she occasionally has the impression that someone is whispering in her ear."

"But, good God!" said Mr. Bickley miserably, "that sounds like madness!"

"It sounds like nothing of the sort," replied Sir Perseus sharply; "get any such idea out of your head. Mariella is ill, but she's absolutely sane."

"Of course she's sane," said young Randall violently.

Sir Perseus looked across at him, and once more his expert eye was steeply challenged by that look about him.

"What does she hear whispered?" asked Mr. Bickley.

"She is uncertain about that. She thinks she has heard the words 'September the tenth,' but usually it sounds more like vague chatter. She likened it rather vividly to those soft husky mutterings one often hears between items on the Radio. And once or twice she fancies she hears a sort of sniggering chuckle. She believes she heard such a sound first before she felt that tickling sensation. However, I don't think such details have much significance. The point is, she is ill, she has some disturbing, I may say dangerous, symptoms. She must not be left alone; she must have the reinforce-



ment and comfort of you all, and especially of you, Mr. Randall. You are to be her future husband, and she naturally already regards you as the person who will guard and cherish her in the coming time. All this is inevitably a very horrible business for you, but you must do your utmost to conceal the fact in front of her."

"Have you really ever known a case like this?" asked young Randall, leaning forward and regarding the Specialist with a haggard and earnest gaze. "I mean, I mean, do people have such hallucinations without any real cause for them?"

Sir Perseus paused before replying, "That depends on what you mean by a '*real cause*.' I *have* known similar cases, but only when, as I have told Mr. Bickley, some deep indentation has been made on the patient's mind from severe shock—psychic shock, I mean. I have read, of course, of some alleged phenomena, reported from Eastern lands, which have always seemed to be hopelessly unsubstantiated—witchery, hocus-pocus, mumbo-jumbo. If such phenomena have any basis in fact they can, in my opinion, be satisfactorily explained by the potent influence of auto-suggestion on the primitive mind. It is significant that they seem to lose their force with the donning of trousers. But we are wandering from the point, the subject on hand, and I must go and get something to eat. Mariella,"



he concluded impressively, "is a healthy-minded Western girl, she isn't a Zulu or a South-Sea islander, and she is in great trouble; I do not wish to minimise the extent of that trouble, but she can and must be cured, and you two, and of course her mother, but you especially, Mr. Randall, can greatly assist the process of recovery by your tact, your love, your intelligent determination."

Mr. Bickley saw him out, and while he was doing so young Randall drank another half-tumbler of neat whisky.

Mariella recovered slowly. The next day she had several attacks of semi-hysteria, and she insisted that everything grey should be taken from her room. And she had a strong but diminishing antipathy for hair, so much so that she asked her mother to wear a shawl over her head. And the latter cut away the ribboned streamers from the electric fan, because she noticed Mariella staring at them in a rather strange way as they fluttered in the draught.

Young Randall spent several hours a day with her and appeared to be attempting—without complete success—to be obeying Sir Perseus's instructions. The latter came every afternoon and was breezily chatty and reassuring, but it was a full week before his patient was well enough to come downstairs, though she had no relapse in the meantime; but Sir Perseus was less reassured by this than he allowed

himself to appear. She never referred to her condition or trouble, and seemed indeed rather disinterested in her progress, and yet, so it seemed to Sir Perseus, she was psychically abnormal, subtly so, almost as though she were "entranced"; hypnotised, though in a very sly, unobtrusive way. He attributed this vague spiritual eccentricity to shock, and he told himself that she would either make a slow but sure recovery or relapse suddenly and violently and become past his aid. She talked very little and paid the very slightest heed to anything anyone else said, and spent most of the day sitting in a chair on the beach and staring out to sea. "Somehow she doesn't seem quite a free agent," thought Sir Perseus. Her mother, who hid a very deep distress with heroic success and had become just the mother of a sick child, had formed the habit of waking up frequently during the night, but only once found anything to report to Sir Perseus, when Mariella suddenly sat up in bed and said, "Who's that whispering?" and then sank back again and went to sleep, though she muttered at intervals, as if discussing something almost under her breath with someone who was visiting her in her dreams. That happened during the early hours of September 9th. On the next morning there was a remarkable change in her. She came down to breakfast in her bathing costume and seemed her old care-free self.

She talked away fluently and flippantly and, one would have judged, she kept no remembrance whatsoever of any displeasing experiences. Young Randall, who had been a wretched, withered shadow of himself ever since that evening when he had seen Mariella sprawled down the shingle, and drinking far too much in Mr. Bickley's opinion, responded instantly to his fiancée's changed state, and it was a very thankful and delighted trio which went down with Mariella to the beach about eleven o'clock. It was a blithe day, cloudless and breezy, and the small waves chased in hard on each other's heels.

Mariella and young Randall stretched themselves out and let the searching rays of the sun pour through them, and then, just before twelve o'clock, they got up lazily and dawdled down to the water's edge. The beach was crowded, and Mariella seemed quite content that everyone should have a generous opportunity of scrutinising once more her exquisite workmanship and finish.

"I heard a rumour," said one envious damsel to another, "that she's really not quite 'all there'; gets fits about once a week."

"She certainly has got something rather odd about her," said her girl friend. "I expect that's why that Mr. Randall has been looking so worried lately. What a figure he's got and how good-looking! I'd give ten years of my life for a month with him."

What a shame he should be tied up to someone who isn't quite sane ! ”

These charitable and erotic observations had just been exchanged when Mariella began to step delicately into the sea. Young Randall was already swimming about and waiting for her to join him in a cruise to the raft. She forced her way slowly in, rubbing her hands and uttering the conventional light cries evoked by the tart embraces of the North Sea. She paused for a moment as it splashed up over her waist, waved her hands to her parents, and then strode forward again. The water had just reached her neck when she suddenly screamed, flung up her arms and disappeared. In an instant the beach was in an uproar. Those in the sea swam furiously towards the spot where she had last been seen, a dozen sun-bathers dashed down into the sea, the boatman struggled at his oars, but young Randall was there first, and he dived for her. To Mr. and Mrs. Bickley, who had dashed down to the sea, it seemed a thousand years till he appeared holding Mariella round her armpits and brought her ashore. A doctor had run up and he got busy with artificial respiration, but Mariella, though she had swallowed more sea-water than was good for her, was in no danger of death from drowning, and though she showed no sign of coming-to she was very soon in a condition to be carried back to the house. A quarter

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## OLD MAN'S BEARD

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of an hour later Sir Perseus was at her bedside. And then for a moment she recovered consciousness, and after staring fixedly at Sir Perseus for a full ten seconds, she said in a cold, toneless voice: "I put my foot on a face. I could feel it. And then I felt the hair, and it began to come up my legs and pull me down." And then she began to scream and scream and scream, and it took all the strength of Sir Perseus and young Randall to hold her down in bed. Presently her struggles became less violent and Sir Perseus put a hypodermic syringe to her arm.

Five hours later she was on her way to a London Nursing Home in an ambulance which paid no heed to speed limits, her mother and Sir Perseus with her. His last words to her father and young Randall were: "I will save her reason if I can, but you must be prepared for the worst." And then with the light of battle in his eye he leaped into the ambulance. Mr. Bickley and young Randall stayed behind by his orders; they would only be in the way for the present. He would ring up early the next morning and tell them what to do.

Mr. Bickley, who spent the evening in deep and melancholy reverie, hardly noticed the absence of young Randall. He in no way wished for company, and no doubt Randall felt the same way. Could Mariella have had some affair with a Grey Beard? She might have had. Certain horrible conjectures

tapped for entrance to his brain. Utterly worn out he lay down on the sofa in the drawing-room, but he could not sleep. At seven o'clock a maid came in and handed him a letter. To his surprise he recognised young Randall's writing on the envelope. He opened it and found it contained two separate enclosures. The first he took up was headed "Letter 2. Letter 1 to be read first." So he unfolded number 1 and read as follows :

" DEAR MR. BICKLEY,

" When you get this I shall be lying in the gorse patch below the eighth tee, and I shall have even less brains in my head than I was born with. Incidentally it will be the first time I was ever on the left-hand side of that fairway. No doubt that sounds very flippant, but once I had finally made up my mind to shoot myself and knew I should have the guts to do it—four hours ago—I became almost light-hearted, in a way exalted, scrubbed and robed for death. This mood would not have lasted, but it will remain with me at least long enough. The fact is, I poisoned my uncle, which was not nearly so difficult a feat as it sounds, for his doctor was half-witted and I made a careful study of his habits and his medicine chest. He was a vile, disgusting old Sadist and I feel no remorse whatsoever. Killing him seemed as natural a performance as beating



down a wasp, and by killing him I did many people a service, for everyone who served him and was in his employ breathed a sigh of relief when they heard of his death. However, I am no altruist, and I should never have taken the serious risk entailed by experimenting with his sleeping-draught but for one thing. It came to my knowledge that he was about to make a new will, and cutting me right out of it. Consequently I should have to give up Mariella. Now I am not going to dwell on what that knowledge meant to me, for I know you realise how I feel about her. Life without her is unthinkable. Well, why am I going to kill myself? For this reason—my uncle had a rather *long grey beard*. That is why. The moment I heard of Mariella's nightmares I had a dreadful suspicion that my plans had failed. When I heard why she had that seizure on the beach I almost believed it was hopeless. What happened this morning convinced me that the rest was up to me. Now I have no belief in a future life. My uncle was one of the few people I have met who deserved to go to the conventional hell, and I have never met anyone bad enough to merit the conventional heaven. Nevertheless, by some agency Mariella is being attacked, and I have a curious feeling of certainty that those attacks will cease when I am dead. Her sanity, I am convinced, depends on what I am about to do. Now I have worked out



what I believe to be a consistent and plausible explanation of this, but I shall not go into it, for I must hurry, and very probably it would sound like lunacy to anyone but me. If, however, I am wrong and I meet Uncle Walter hereafter and find out something, then he'll really know what hell can be ! But I'm afraid that is too optimistic a prospect. Now I want you to do something for me. I want you to tear up this letter as soon as you've read it and send the other to the coroner—or whatever the procedure is. I can't bear to think that people might point at Mariella as someone who almost married a murderer, and I don't want her to know I was one. She won't—and I am reconciled to the fact—sorrow for me for long. When she is well again I shall just seem part of a horrible memory, and as she forgets that she will forget me. And I'd rather it was so. Good-bye. I was once so happy with you all.

“ A. R.”

When he had finished reading it Mr. Bickley tore the letter to small pieces and burnt it in the grate. And then he took up the other and read :

“ DEAR MR. BICKLEY,

“ I am about to shoot myself in the gorse below the eighth tee because I have discovered a

horrible secret about myself. There is no need to tell you what this is, and I'd rather no one knew it, but it makes it impossible for me to marry your daughter, and life without her is unthinkable, so I am doing this."

"A. R."

Mr. Bickley put this epistle back into its envelope and went to the telephone.

The following April Mariella returned from a long sea voyage perfectly restored to health. The following August she became affianced to a certain Mr. Peter Raines, whose past is as bland and innocent as an infant's posterior, but concerning whose future stupendous prophecies are made. He has just left Oxford, where he was President of the Union, and only the fact that he has been adopted as Conservative candidate for a Midland constituency has prevented him from completing a really "brilliant and daring" novel. As it is, he is about to publish a slim volume of essays entitled, *Constructive Toryism*. Mariella is blissfully happy, and if she dreams at all it is of this formidable young thinker. Except just once when she had a very sharp dream vision of someone dark and lithe, beautifully poised, and flicking Larwood's cannon-balls from his nose to the rails. She has just one idiosyncrasy—she cannot

remain in the same room with a grey-bearded male person. But the owners of such are fortunately uncommon and, even in Scotland, becoming rarer every day.

Mr. and Mrs. Bickley are very well indeed.



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*THE LAST TO LEAVE*

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## THE LAST TO LEAVE

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ARNOTT pushed aside the papers on the table in front of him and got up. "Well," he said, "I think that's all the business for to-day, and it's good-bye to Number 5."

"When do they actually begin to murder the dear old place?" asked Walters.

"They start dismantling to-morrow afternoon, I believe. They're in a hurry, as they want to get the mess pretty well cleared up before the end of the holidays. Anyway it's got to be done. If the Borough Surveyor saw the condition of that beam in your room, Bob, he'd condemn the house without a moment's hesitation; for if that worm-eaten old hero did what he has threatened to do for the last six months, and decide he was as tired as he looks, we should probably all be cadavers in the basement inside ten seconds. I hated signing the death-warrant, but it will be a great weight off my mind when we're all safely installed in Russell Street."

"All the stock has been taken round, hasn't it?" asked Moberly.

"Yes," replied Arnott, sitting down again and lighting a cheroot, "and, by the way, *Tambourin* is



going very strong. Smiths' had fifty again this morning, Simpkins' another twenty-five, and both *The Times* and Mudie's have repeated."

"Well, it's a good book," said Moberly with a yawn. "The most deliberately naïve plot, excellently sardonic characterisation, and charmingly sophisticated dialogue, a young man's pen and an old man's mind, the type of the Best-Seller of the future in my humble and usually inaccurate opinion. To find everything rather ridiculous and yet worth writing about, that paradox which stokes the genuine satirist's mind and keeps its safety-valve screaming."

"And," said Arnott, "no smut for smut's sake and no bunk for James Douglas's. It's very soothing to have one selling like that. One week's sales will pay for the move and 'then some.'"

"And to think it's by a *man over thirty*," added Walters. "How rare and refreshing! Thank the Lord we've got him nicely tied up for the next four."

"I hate leaving this room," said Arnott. "I've done so much darned hard work in it, and I have always had a silly feeling that it was the sort of work it respected—making books. Supposing we were in the *brassière* business, for example, how the old aristocrat would have felt his walls degraded, for I bet he's really a hopeless old snob. He'd have collapsed long ago. Whatever authors may say,

publishing is a gent's job and, considering what authors are like, the fact that we swindle them so little is a great tribute to our integrity."

"We've a pretty decent bunch on the whole," said Moberly. "Certainly they are the crosses we have to bear, but ours are fairly light, and, provided one always agrees that their last book is their best, and they see their singular countenances in gossip columns at regular intervals, they're not so much trouble as they're worth. As for the old house, I feel like whimpering too, but you, Jack, can't reproach yourself. You've spent your own real money in prolonging its life to the last possible moment, and it ought to be very grateful to you."

"I should like to think so," replied Arnott with a smile. "And now it's half-past five and time for a little farewell ceremony, a little suitable sentimentality." He got up and went to his cupboard, from which he took out a bottle and three glasses. He twisted off the wire, eased out the cork and filled the glasses.

"Now," he said, "let us drink of this quite tolerable Roderer to the memory of Number 5, Equity Court, built in the prosperous reign of King William and Queen Mary, designed by a gentleman to be a home for gentlefolk, a gentleman itself. In a few hours the pick will be laid at its roots, in a few days it will be a vulgar heap of rubble, but it is still a

small poem in bricks and mortar. We have looked after it so far as was in our power; it has been a good friend to us. Now we strike our tents. But its memory will remain with us. We have loved it; let us hope it has tolerated us. So here's to the memory of Number 5, Equity Court. . . . My God, what was that? "

He put down his glass and rushed to the bell, and a moment later the manager came into the room, looking nervous.

"What was that row?" asked Arnott sharply.

"You mean that big cracking sound, sir?"

"Yes, of course. It sounded as if someone had dropped a ton weight somewhere in the house. Run up and see if the beam's holding. I'll go downstairs."

The others went with him. All the members of the small staff of John Arnott & Co., Ltd., were out in the passages, looking uncertain.

"I thought it came from your room, sir," said James the clerk, addressing Moberly.

The latter hurried across the corridor. "No," he said after a moment, "everything's O.K. here."

"I thought it came from your room too, sir," added the book-keeper.

"Well, it didn't," answered Moberly, a shade irritably.

Just then the manager joined them. "Beam

looks just the same, sir," he said, "and if I may say so, when I've stayed late I've thought I heard noises sometimes."

"Thought!" cried Arnott; "not much thinking about that. Heavens above, I believed it had gone at last! Not a pleasant feeling," he added, wiping his forehead.

"What sort of noises do you think you've heard?" asked Walters.

"Steps and creakings like people moving about."

"How often?"

"Oh, just now and again, sir, Mrs. Rummy, the charwoman, says the same thing."

"Well, those weren't steps or creakings," said Arnott. "Something went then, I'm certain of it, and I thought we were going with it." And he mopped his brow again.

Presently the three partners returned to Arnott's room.

"You two are going off now, I suppose," he said. "I think I'll wait a bit and clear up. I suppose the van comes for the furniture early to-morrow?"

"Yes," replied Walters, "at nine punctually."

"Well, then, I'll clear up everything to-night. There's not much to do, and I don't suppose I'll be late, but I shall feel happier when I've got the Essays' estimates finally worked out."

They said good-night, and then Arnott sat down

at his desk, took some papers out of a drawer, opened his estimate book, shook his fountain pen and put himself to work. Half-consciously he heard the staff one by one leaving the house; each time the swing-door, which divided the short outer passage from the rest of the building, groaned lightly, it signalled the homeward exit of another. Presently all was silence save for the light, indeterminate stretchings of the oak panelling. Arnott set himself seriously to the problem of how to lower the production cost of the new series of non-copyright essays, the first four titles of which his firm proposed to publish during the next spring. They must be nice little books, in appearance superior to any rival series, but every fraction of a farthing counted and he must get a penny off the cost if it could possibly be managed. He had just turned to the binding estimate when he thought he heard the swing-door creak again.

He was so absorbed in his figures that for a moment he disregarded this insignificant little sound, but then the echo of it as it were tapped on the back door of his consciousness, and he was saying to himself, "Now, who can that be? The charwoman? No, she comes in the morning." Did it matter? Well, perhaps he'd better go down and see. He went to his door, turned on the light in the passage, and went down the two flights of stairs to the

ground floor. There didn't seem to be anyone about. He visited the trade department, the packing and waiting rooms, each quiet and lifeless. And then he went up again to his room. But he found it difficult to concentrate; he was unable quite to expel the problem of the swing-door from his mind. Presently he recalled that it was accustomed to move without human agency when a westerly wind surged rudely into the Court. So he looked out of his window. Heavens! how the fog had thickened. He could only just see across to the Estate Agent's office opposite, a mere eight yards away. That swirling dank curtain completely cut off his view of the entrance to Equity Court, and the tiniest breeze would have parted wide that opaque curtain. It couldn't be the wind then. Well, why worry! Very probably he'd imagined the whole thing. ("No, you didn't," insinuated his subconscious.) He must get back to business.

He picked up the book of cloth samples and went through it carefully and critically. He had just decided that a second quality aquamarine would be quite good enough, would mean the saving of a halfpenny per copy, and look bright and attractive, when his head went up and he appeared to be listening intently. If those weren't footsteps from Wells's room above him, what were they? He'd heard him stumping about a thousand times. He went to his



door, opened it half-way, and listened. No, there wasn't a sound now. All the same, perhaps he'd better go up. It was just possible there might be someone in the house. How could there be? That swing-door? Probably his imagination. Well, then, those footsteps? Oh, very well, he'd go up, but he'd never finish this job if there were all these interruptions. He ascended the stairs a shade heavily and opened the door of Wells's room. Of course there was nothing there. This was the last time he'd see the old room. It looked bare, and as if laid out for burial, old and tired, reconciled to being a part of a heap of rubble a few hours later. What weird, tiny sounds there were! Just then, for example, as if there were people whispering; yes, it sounded like whispering, but a whisper was a sound made by human agency—a house could not whisper—yet for a fleeting second he entertained the possibility that there might be something neither human nor composed of bricks and mortar, which might make a noise that could be likened to a whisper, for lack of a more precise word—a very far-carrying conception which he succeeded in repressing.

He tip-toed back to his room in a stealthy way which his common-sense derided, but the state of his nerves dictated, and once again tried to lash his mind back to those numerals and abstractions,

which faded out with such craven obsequiousness at the suggestion of these small, uncertain sounds. How hard it is, he tried not to tell himself, to concentrate when one is expecting—well, not exactly expecting, some new little interruption. And concentration becomes impossible when that diluted kind of expectation is fulfilled, for if those soft tappings were not made by someone coming down the stairs from the floor above—well, what the devil were they? Now they seemed to have paused just outside his door, just outside. Acting on a sudden and, he realised, ill-advised impulse, he picked up a box of matches and flung it at the door, and then was very angry with himself for having done so, for a person only did a thing like that to drive someone or something away—or to reassure oneself that there was nothing to drive away—no one or nothing to startle. And then, insidiously, the echo of the manager's remark came back to his mind, "When I've stayed late, I've thought I heard sounds sometimes," "and unlike me," thought Arnott, "had the guts to disregard them. But I wonder if he heard steps coming down the stairs and halting outside his room. Well, have I? Why should I call them steps? Instead of just vague, indeterminate—vague, indeterminate what?"

He got up again to distract his thoughts from their fuddled peregrinations and went to have a last look

at his mantelpiece, a masterpiece of its period, about which those who had expert knowledge of such things were enthusiastic. What would be its latter end? It belonged to the ground landlord and he'd probably sell it to a Yank; and it would end up in Park Avenue; and why not? He liked Yanks, admired their taste, and in certain moods preferred them to his own ruddy countrymen. That chap who'd been sketching Number 5 for the *Sunday Budget* had passed his hand up and down the embossed detail of the mantelpiece and told him he got a sharp, sensuous delight from such a contact. Very possible and plausible. Let him see if he got any such sensation. Yes, he did. It was exquisitely smooth, silky—in a way feminine—and warm, yes, most curiously warm. And then he remembered how that person had been surprised to find that sort of cowled head screened in the foliage, and had said he'd never seen a more or less conventional floral design of this period housing any such sly intruder, a joke on the part of the carver, he had considered it. He'd feel that too. And then he swung his hand back sharply. Good God! It seemed red-hot. Yet he'd turned his electric stove off an hour since. Well, his imagination was running away with him. He'd better chuck work and be off. It was natural enough to be a little fallaciously percipient on his last night in the old house.

Good heavens! there was another of those frightful rending sounds, and then he felt something drop lightly on his head and he looked up. Yes, that was plaster falling, and that rent in the ceiling had suddenly stretched two inches. The house was on its last legs, dying slowly—perhaps not so slowly—considering that plaster and that extending crack above him. And then there was a sharp metallic tap and his door wavered uncertainly for a moment, and then swung on its hinges with a decisive, and final, and muted crash. That last settling down of the house must have wrenched the latch out of true. And then in came the fog, questingly and waveringly, like a lady curtsying into a Throne-Room. And in with it came that whispering, so that Arnott had a horrible impression that he was no longer alone in his room. He *must, must, must* fight his way down. Could he? Dared he? He must! Never mind his hat and coat. To be outside—that was everything. But supposing he ran down and fumbled with the latch of the front door! Fumbled and fumbled, and those steps kept coming down those last two flights! Would he be able to open it in time and dash outside? To be outside—that was everything.

He had just poised himself to run when there came a dreadful, ripping rending. And then there was a second's pause, and then he felt himself flung for-

ward and down the plaster poured on to him. The window crashed outward, his light bulb swung wildly and shattered, and he was hurled through a splintered wall, his arms flung out beseechingly. And as he dropped through space a fleeting thought came to him—"That was how they said it would go." And then he was prone on his back and a welter of bricks, desks, chairs and tiles splashed wildly down beside him.

His escape was always afterwards described as "a miracle," for he was absolutely untouched. The débris rained down beside him, but not one particle touched a hair of his head. For a moment he lost consciousness and then for a few seconds came to himself. He saw the dust rising up to meet and mingle curiously with the fog, and it seemed to him that out from the piled ruin two little cowed figures stepped delicately; and that one of these figures hesitated for a moment, and then turned back and came and looked down on him, and the impression he received was that he was regarded very benignly and gently and sweetly, and, as it were, said "good-bye" to by something which gazed for a long, deep moment into his eyes and then slipped down the court and disappeared.

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*THE CAIRN*

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## THE CAIRN

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"I'd like to go with you," said Welland, "but I think I had better nurse this heel if I'm to get through the rest of the trip."

"Yes, certainly," agreed Seebright, "you'd be a fool to attempt it. But I like the look of those silvery slopes above the wood. Ever since I was a kid I've loved high hills and virgin snow. I don't imagine it will take me more than four hours or so up and down. All the same it might be as well to get one of the locals to go with me—it's easy to miss the shortest way even on such a simple climb as old Brudon looks to be."

"Well, ring for our worthy host and see if he can arrange it."

Seebright pulled the bell-knob, and a moment later the landlord appeared, a tubby, rubicund Midlander, genial, of andante intelligence and consequently at perfect peace with the world.

"Oh, Mr. Reddle," said Seebright, "I'm going to climb Brudon to-morrow. Mr. Welland has a bad heel and I want a companion; would someone from the village go with me?"

"I don't believe they would, sir," replied the landlord.

"What on earth do you mean? Don't they like the look of me?"

Mr. Reddle shifted about on his feet. "It isn't that, sir, but the chaps about here won't climb Brudon when snow's lying."

"Why the devil not?"

"Well, sir, it's just that way. They won't go beyond the wood on any account, and most of 'em don't like setting foot on the hill when snow's lying."

"But why? I can't imagine a simpler or easier climb. Is it because it's too much like work?"

"No, 'tain't that. I'm not a native of these parts, so I don't hear everything as a local chap would; but they've got some reason why they won't go above Dim Wood in the snow."

"Is that big spinney half-way up Dim Wood?" asked Welland.

"Yes, sir. The fact is they think there's something that wanders on the slopes above it when snow's there."

"And hides behind the cairn and pounces on the unsuspecting climber?" suggested Seebright, laughing.

"Yes," replied Mr. Reddle, looking startled, "that's just what they does think."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Seebright. "Do they think they've seen it?"

"They're pretty close about it, sir. The chaps get sullen like and changes the subject if it's mentioned, but it seems as though they think they've seen some marks. I gather it's a very old story, a sort of village secret."

"A very typical piece of folk-funk," said Welland. "A few probably perfectly explainable marks in the snow, and, of course, the devil or some other undesirable is abroad. Away goes the snow, away go the marks and away goes the devil."

"Well, landlord," said Seebright, "you're above that sort of thing. Come with me to-morrow and help to lay what must be rather an inconvenient bogey."

"I don't believe I will, sir," said Mr. Reddle.

"What!" cried Seebright, "you don't mean to say you believe this tripe?"

"I don't say I does, but I believes in being on the safe side in such things. I'd do the same if I was you, sir."

"Be damned to that! I'll climb Brudon if it snows ink!"

"As you please, sir, but in any case you wouldn't want a guide, the way is as easy to find as hard to miss. I'll show you, if you'll look through the telescope. You takes the third turn to the right in

the village—Dim Lane—that takes you up to that big clump of oaks; then you follows the hedge till you comes to a gate, and then you goes straight up to the wood. There is a path through that and then it's all plain sailing to the cairn. And now I must go and see about your dinners, sir."

Pat Seebright and Leonard Welland differed in temperament as much as they differed in their command of this world's goods. Yet to have laid down his life for the other would have been considered a privilege by either of them. If the summons had come, neither of them would have hesitated for a moment. They had been the fastest, firmest friends for twenty years. Pat made an easy £10,000 a year in his father's stockbroker's firm. Leonard secured from the National Income a precarious £250 as an usher in a small school. Yet the overwhelming disparity between their income-tax returns had never in the slightest degree tarnished their friendship, and Pat had never lent Leonard a penny. All he had done was to persuade him to allow him occasionally to do a little marginal speculation on his behalf with a rather mythical £50. These occasional flutters came off in a most magical manner, and every year a most welcome little increment was paid into Leonard's bank. Intellectually, Pat was a child in comparison with Leonard, but in the practical affairs of life he was

absolutely his master. Each envied and complemented the other. Pat was of an enterprising and inquiring type of mind, and Leonard stimulated and vitalised strata of his brain which would otherwise have perished of malnutrition.

Neither was ever quite happy when separated from the other, though an innate sense of the supreme obscenity of sentimentality would ever have prevented them from acknowledging the fact. Their affection for each other so far surpassed the love of woman that had they been forced to face the conventionally considered ultimate tie of friendship by falling in love with the same one, they would have left her to celibacy or a third person with absolute contentment, in the certain knowledge that such a competition would have been essentially discordant and disgusting. Each secretly dreaded the possible marriage of the other, though in the case of poor Leonard, who had to think twice about purchasing packets of cigarettes, and who met about three fresh females per annum, such a contingency was highly improbable. (As things turned out there was no need for either of them to worry.) They always spent their holidays together, and on this occasion were passing the Christmas vacation in tramping the Lake District. Their time was almost up, for in three days' time they were due to drive back to London in Pat's impressive car. Perhaps it was this



which seemed to cast a shadow over their dinner together that night. Both felt it and confessed to it. Pat applied his usually infallible antidote to irrational gloom by ordering a bottle of Mr. Reddle's champagne and two large glasses of his mediocre port. However, this medicine was not quite as successful as it should have been—the shadow remained.

“That's a curious yarn about Brudon and the snow,” said Welland. “In other circumstances it would be easier to explain. This alleged bogey might be, let us say, the personified terror of avalanches, but I don't suppose an avalanche has sprayed down Brudon since the end of the Ice Age, and even the traditional memory of the good folk of Borthwaite cannot be as long as that. Still, even on Brudon a blizzard might not be too pleasant; are you sure you're wise to go alone?”

“Oh, perfectly,” replied Seebright; “anyway I shan't start if the weather breaks. How's the glass, Mr. Reddle?”

“Steady enough, sir. From the looks of the sky I'd say 'twill be fine but dullish to-morrow.”

They went to bed early and Welland was asleep at once, but his rest was disturbed by the recurrence of a very idiotic little dream. It seemed to him that it was moonlight and that he was gazing through the telescope at the cairn, which was throwing a hard

shadow on to the snow. And then this shadow began to move, and as it moved it changed its shape and became more like a crouching beast of some kind than any such shadow had a right to be. And were those flaming points red eyes? And each time, before he could make up his mind on this—for some reason or other—rather urgent question, he awoke. “Now I will not dream that again,” he said to himself, but a moment later he was once more scrutinising with a growing anxiety and distaste this erratic and enigmatic shade. After this had happened five or six times he sat up in bed. Self-flatterers, he said to himself, would attribute this bother to nerves; honest men to alcohol. What should he do about it? Well, it occurred to him that if he crept very quietly downstairs and swung the telescope on to the cairn and proved to his full consciousness that nothing of the sort was abroad, then his subconscious—or whatever it was—would be convinced that no such wearisome phenomenon, such change of shape, was occurring at the crest of Brudon.

The moon was filtering vague rays through light clouds. So much of his dream *was* true. Well, here was the telescope and there was Brudon. He put his eye to the lens and swung the glass to the cairn. And then he put it down and rubbed his eyes, and then he took it up again, stared through it

intently for a full twenty seconds and put it down again. And then he returned rather slowly and thoughtfully to bed.

"Of course I must be slightly tight," he said to himself. "That's why I can't sleep, that's why I see things through telescopes. No more double ports for me. All the same——" And for a moment he felt a powerful inclination to go down again and take up the telescope and make quite sure that—— He looked at his watch—five o'clock—and he did not feel sleepy. He decided to read till it was time to get up; something which would mobilise his powers of concentration, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, for example. Once he found himself dozing off and there was just the vague, spectral outline of a cairn and a shadow beginning most exasperatingly to reappear. He pulled himself back to consciousness, and taking each sentence slowly etched it on his brain.

As Mr. Reddle had prophesied, the morning was fine but overcast, and the glass remaining high, Seebright announced his intention of starting at 12.30. He would reach the wood about 2.0 and the summit about 3.30—just as dusk was beginning to fall. There would be enough light to see him down to the wood and he would be back at the inn before 5.0.

"And you can follow my progress, Leonard, through the telescope," he said, "and mutter prayers for my safety. Now, Mr. Reddle, are you sure you won't come with me?"

"No, thank 'ee, sir, and if you'd take my advice you'd change your mind. Why not have a try for some of them ducks on the marsh?"

"I'm going to climb the Haunted Hill," said Seebright with the utmost emphasis. "I am determined to convince the superstitious natives of these parts that climbing this measly hill with two inches of snow on it is not precisely the perilous ordeal they profess to consider it. I shall—if he appears—tweak the nose of the local bogey, and I am off to do this now."

"Very well, sir," replied the landlord, "and I wish you luck."

Seebright set forth punctually at 12.30 and Welland watched his strong, stocky figure striding away down the village street. As he reached the third turning on the right he turned back and waved.

Welland lunched at 1.0, and afterwards sat down by the telescope, and attempted once again to concentrate upon the profound yet racy speculations of Dr. Bradley, but again without much success. His body seemed to protest against its immobility. It joined in a conspiracy with his nervous system to compel fidgets and fussiness and a sort of tingling

unease, so that he repeatedly pulled out his watch and yawned and lit cigarettes and shifted his position, and these tendencies developed and became more insistent—they almost took charge of him—and the effort to resist them was exhausting in a small way.

Presently he gave up the attempt to read and took up the telescope. He searched very carefully the slopes between the wood and the cairn. If those weren't footmarks in the snow what were they? Very possibly the locals were in the habit of pulling Mr. Reddle's—"the foreigner's"—leg. Certainly someone had travelled those slopes. Those marks were extraordinarily distinct. Would that be due to their size? He looked at his watch again—five minutes to two. Pat should be appearing at any moment now. Looking through a small telescope like this was a damned tiring business. Ah, there he was! As he came out from the wood Welland saw him pause—he is looking at those footprints—or whatever they are—he thought. Seebright remained peering down for half a minute or so and then began climbing steadily again. Welland found he could just follow him with the naked eye, so he put down the telescope. Mr. Reddle came in just then. "How's he getting on?" he asked.

"He should be at the top in twenty minutes or so."

The landlord seemed not quite at his ease. "Getting a bit misty near the cairn, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes," replied Welland, "the clouds are coming down; looks like a change in the weather, I fancy."

"Well, sir, I shall be in the kitchen for a bit yet. Would you mind letting me know when Mr. Seebright gets back to the wood again?"

"All right," replied Welland, looking at him a shade sharply.

"It's just a fancy of mine, sir," said Mr. Reddle, "if it's no bother," and he went out again.

Welland watched the little dark speck climbing steadily towards the cairn till it was but a hundred yards or so from it and then once again put the telescope to his eye. A few minutes later he saw Seebright reach the cairn, slap it with his hand and then turn and face towards the inn and wave his right arm above his head. And then he began rapidly to descend. Welland had started instinctively to wave back and then had smiled at his stupidity. He was just about to put the glass down again when he suddenly became tense and intent. He put the telescope down sharply and rubbed both lenses with his handkerchief, and then he put it to his eye again. For a moment he remained taut and rigid, and then he began to tremble, and then he dropped the telescope to the floor, and then he rushed from the room, out through the front door and down

the village street. As it happened there was only one person who saw him pass, old Mrs. Elm, who was beating a rug outside her cottage door. When she saw a hatless figure dash hobbling past, and that queer look on his face too, her mouth fell open and the rug dropped from her hands. A moment later she saw this figure turn up the lane and disappear, and then for several minutes she remained staring open-mouthed.

Now Mrs. Elm's brain never exceeded *largo* in its tempo, and seldom reached it. At the same time she had a sense for the unusual. She went back to her kitchen and wrestled with the problem of what to do. So presently she put her shawl around her head and trotted up to the Hare and Form, where she found Mr. Reddle squeezing the digestive apparatus from a chicken.

"Mr. Reddle," she began, and fiddled with her shawl.

"Yes, what is it?" asked the landlord, pausing in the midst of his culinary business.

"Well," said Mrs. Elm. "I sees one of those young chaps who's putting up here, and I sees him running by in his slippers and without his hat and he turned up Dim Lane. I thought I ought to tell you."

Mr. Reddle stared at her for a moment; then he rushed past Mrs. Elm and into the guest parlour, stood stock still for a moment gazing round the room,



then noticed the end of the telescope sticking out from beneath the table. He picked it up, stared for a moment through it at the dusk-rimmed crest of Brudon, and then rushed through the front door and down the village street. By a lucky chance he met the local representative of Law and Order, Constable Lamb. Mr. Reddle clutched his arm. "I think there's maybe something wrong on Brudon," he said, "maybe something's happened to those young chaps staying with me."

Mr. Lamb started at him sharply, but something in Mr. Reddle's face, and a rather disturbing memory which had often recurred to lubricate the somewhat sluggish machinery of his imagination, prevented him from asking some rather natural questions. All he said was, "We'd better see if the doctor's in."

They ran together down the street to where a brass plate announced that "R. Ford, M.D., Physician and Surgeon," had there his habitat. He was in and he *did* ask a few questions, but his natural scepticism was also diluted with a certain memory, and presently he picked up his bag, his hat and coat and an electric torch and started off with the other two. Soon they were climbing in panting silence through the dusk, the doctor's torch faintly revealing the way. They had just reached the last turn on the path through Dim Wood when the doctor stumbled over something. . . .

"Just describe to us, constable, exactly how you found the deceased," said the coroner.

"Well," said Mr. Lamb, "Mr. Seebright was lying on his back, his arms thrown out like, and Mr. Welland was about six yards away. *He* was lying on his face—more crouching than lying—but his face was in the snow. They'd both fallen hard."

"Did you examine the snow for tracks of a third person?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you find anything?"

"No, sir."

"You saw tracks of Mr. Seebright going up and coming down to the wood, but nothing else?"

"Nothing else, sir."

Dr. Ford was the next witness.

"Dr. Ford," said the coroner, "I take it you have performed an autopsy on the deceased."

"I have."

"Would you tell the Court what you learned from so doing?"

"Both were strong, healthy young men, organically flawless. They had sustained extensive superficial injuries, bruises and so forth, and Mr. Welland had a broken arm. These injuries were consistent with the fact that they had been thrown down with great violence."

“ Were these injuries sufficient to cause death? ”

“ No, emphatically not.”

“ Then can you suggest why these two young men died? ”

“ Frankly, I cannot. It is conceivable that some very violent shock, sudden terror for example, may have resulted in heart failure in each case. When I say conceivable I mean just possible, but I am at a loss for a convincing explanation of their deaths. I have known no parallel case.”

“ Is Mr. Reddle still here? ” asked the coroner.

Mr. Reddle was, and returned to the box.

“ Mr. Reddle, as I understand it, Mr. Welland had decided not to accompany Mr. Seebright on this climb? ”

“ Yes, sir, he'd hurt his heel.”

“ Then the fact that he suddenly made up his mind to go to meet his friend was a complete surprise to you.”

“ Yes, 'twas, sir.”

“ Can you account for it? ”

“ No, but I think he'd been watching Mr. Seebright through the telescope.”

“ Well, what's that got to do with it? ”

Mr. Reddle was silent for a moment, searching for words.

“ I should say nothing, sir, like as not. I only mentioned it, sir.”

The coroner drummed on the table but there was otherwise no sound. From outside there came the light crack of a whip and the slow rumble of wheels.

"Well," said the coroner at length, "this seems to me an extremely unsatisfactory affair. All I can do is to express my profound sympathy with the parents of these poor young men"—and here he bowed to four persons in deep mourning—"and to express my hope that further light will be eventually shed on this highly mysterious and tragic affair, but I see no object in adjourning the inquest." The verdict was open.

Mr. Reddle followed P.C. Lamb out of the Court and suggested to him that he should come up to the Hare and Form and have some refreshment. The constable had no objection whatsoever. When they were seated in the parlour and furnished with some glossy old pewter, Mr. Reddle said, "You didn't tell the whole truth and nothing but it at the inquest, did you, Mr. Lamb?"

The constable put down his mug and looked suspiciously at the landlord. "How's that?" he said. "What makes you for to say that?"

"Because I was watching you through the glass when you climbed Brudon the morning after we found those poor young chaps."

The constable shifted uneasily in his chair.

" If I tell you what I see'd, will it go no further, will you keep your tongue quiet about it? " he said at length.

" I'll do that," replied Mr. Reddle.

" Well," said Mr. Lamb, " a year or two afore you came, there was a London chap found dead in the wood and that time I *did* tell all I'd see'd. And the Chief Constable sent for me to Rendle and asked me a lot of questions. And at the end of it he said, ' They brew strong ale in Borthwaite, don't they? ' "

" What did you say to make him laugh? "

" I said I'd seen marks in the snow coming along behind the marks made by the London chap."

" What sort of marks? "

" I don't believe I'll be after saying what those marks was like. I don't somehow feel like doing it—not out loud that is, but I'll say this: it seemed to me that whatever made those marks some of the time made four and not two of 'em."

" Sort of crouched down like a time or two? "

" Maybe that," replied the constable.

" About those tracks," said the landlord, " you could make out the ones Mr. Seebright made up and down."

" Yes, I could."

" Would you say he noticed anything? I mean anything that might have to do with them other marks? "

“ Well,” said Mr. Lamb, “ he went up steadily enough, but after he’d come down a couple of hundred yards I judge he’d stopped and looked round; well, you could tell that plain enough, and then he’d started to run.”

“ Started to run, did he ! ” exclaimed Mr. Reddle.

“ That was easy to read too; his stride got longer and he came down harder, and he kept up the running till he got to the top edge of the wood—where we found him. And just as he got there I take it this Mr. Welland met him, and Mr. Seebright stopped and the two of them faced up to whatever—well—to whatever there was to face up to.”

“ That’s what they would have done,” said Mr. Reddle emphatically. “ I guess that’s the rights of it. They’d face up to it together.”

And then there was a long silence in the Hare and Form.

“ Snow’s off Brudon now, I take it? ” asked the constable at length.

“ Yes,” said Mr. Reddle, “ I looked through glass at it round about dinner-time and even that last big patch round cairn is melted.”

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WHEN Mr. Benchley noticed the rabbit he was for the moment out of sight of the other guns. The rabbit crouched and stared at him for a second or two, and then started to run past him across the ride. Mr. Benchley swung his gun ahead of it and fired. The rabbit somersaulted and then lay kicking. Mr. Benchley went up to it. Some of its fur, cut by the pellets, was shaken on to the pine needles as it kicked. One shot had struck its left eye, which was broken and bleeding. When it saw Mr. Benchley looming hugely over it, it ceased to struggle for a moment, and with its uninjured eye it stared at the other animal who had done this to it. And then it kicked out convulsively once more, trembled throughout its length, and was dead. Mr. Benchley picked it up by the hind legs and walked on. Before he rejoined the other guns at the edge of the wood he had three other opportunities of making the fur fly, but he did not take them. He could hear the other guns taking theirs to right and left of him. It was a very quiet and coldly radiant October morning. As Mr. Benchley strode along, the rabbit swung as it dangled from

his hand, and he saw there was a thin trickle of blood pouring down the white patch below its left eye and dripping to the ground. This somewhat distracted his attention from the beauty of the day. As he came out from the wood, an under-keeper took the rabbit from him and flung it down on a rapidly growing pile of its fellows, many of which had rosy cheeks also. One by one the other guns arrived, refilled their pipes and sat down to rest. After a short consultation between Mr. Benchley's host and his head-keeper it was decided to send the beaters round by the road and into the big field of roots facing them, for the purpose of driving the animal inhabitants of that field towards the guns. Those that were edible would be bombarded, and in certain cases the non-edible—stoats, poaching-cats, owls and so on. The guns spread themselves out, lightly concealed by the hedge bordering the wood. The beaters trudged off and Mr. Benchley lit a cigarette. After ten minutes or so he could see the beaters in the distance forming into line and beginning to move forward. Soon he could hear the tapping of their sticks, and almost immediately a big covey rose and flew hard and low towards the wood. As they neared it they rose to clear it. "Bang-bang. Bang-bang-bang. Bang-bang-bang!"

Mr. Benchley got a beautiful right and left and he could hear the birds' bodies crash into the trees

behind him. The root field was well stocked and he was kept very busy for the next quarter of an hour. And he was so occupied with events overhead that he had no time to attend to two hares which, dazed by the din ahead of them, hesitated for a moment at the edge of the roots, and then with their ears back dashed wildly past him. When it was all over and the beaters were mopping their brows, the attention of Mr. Benchley was attracted by a fluttering sound just behind him. This he discovered was being made by a hen partridge with a broken wing and leg, which was attempting unsuccessfully to adjust itself to its altered circumstances. When Mr. Benchley went up to it, it paid little attention to the person who had necessitated this adjustment, but continued to flutter and roll itself over on to its side, and, when this hurt, roll back again. Mr. Benchley picked it up and struck its head twice against his right boot. Not hard enough, obviously, for it continued to writhe in his hand.

“Not often you have to do that, Mr. Benchley,” said a voice. He looked up and there was his host’s rather pretty flapper daughter. He smiled back at her rather uncertainly, and again struck the bird’s head against his toe. It became inert in his hand. The girl took it from him, and he wiped the blood from his boot with a handful of grass. It

was then time for lunch, which was eaten in a barn near by. A rough count proved that the morning's work had been reasonably successful. The number of hares seen and shot surprised his host. "Too damned many of 'em," he declared. Mr. Benchley agreed with him, but remarked very emphatically that he derived little amusement from killing them.

"No more do I," agreed someone. "Too much target. All right for anyone who can shoot, but the bad shots are always back-ending them, and even if they're stopped, they scream, and I don't like that sound a little bit." And he patted his retriever's rump affectionately.

"All the same," said the host, "there are too many of 'em. So shoot all you can."

Presently they moved off to Pearson's spinney, one of the finest pheasant shoots in the country. Mr. Benchley spent the next half-hour dexterously picking those gloriously high birds out of the sky, and hearing the pleasant plump with which they met the ground. His mind was disconnectedly busy with a certain problem, but he continued to load and fire with the virtuosity born of forty years' practice and training. The flapper, who had heard many tales of his prowess, watched him with bright-eyed enthusiasm, and she never forgot having seen him kill fifty-eight pheasants stone dead with his

first seventy cartridges. Mr. Benchley was only vaguely aware of her presence, and it was a sudden sight of her dark blue jumper which made him a shade late on a hare which dashed out straight in front of him and then swung left for cover. It began to drag its hind legs and scream. It managed to pull itself into the heart of a thick thorn bush, and, though Mr. Benchley could hear it well enough, he could not at first catch sight of it. Presently, however, he saw it move and gave it the left barrel. It died at once and he left it there. He jerked out the empty cases, but did not reload. It was near the end of the drive, and when the beaters came up he went to his host and told him he had gun-headache and wouldn't shoot any more.

"All right," said his host; "give your gun to someone to carry back, and if you want tea or a drink, Jenkins will get it for you. There are some aspirins in my medicine chest if you want them. We'll knock off in about another hour."

Mr. Benchley was rather silent during dinner, and pleading a violent headache, went early to bed. He left for London the next morning.

A month later the organising secretary of a certain society for protecting the interests of animals was going through his letters. Eventually he opened one, the contents of which seemed to cause him surprise. He got up and went to the

next room, which was occupied by the publicity manager.

"Dick," he said, "I've got a note here from a bloke named Benchley. I seem to have heard of him. Who is he?"

"A famous Mass Murderer," replied the person addressed. "He's put an end to nearly everything which flies, swims and runs, and in most cases in vast quantities. He once killed a thousand grouse in a day—or a million—some charming record or other—one of the five best shots in England, in every sense of the word—a Bloody Man, I imagine. What the devil does he want with us?"

The publicity manager was a person of intolerant views and intemperate utterance.

"He says he would like to see someone connected with this outfit," replied the secretary. "Let's look him up in *Who's Who*." He fetched that encyclopædia of mediocrity and read out:

"Benchley, Robert Aloysius. Born in 1870. Eldest son of (We'll skip that). Educated at Eton and New College, Oxford. He took a first in Greats, by Jove! Founded firm of R. A. Benchley & Co., Limited. Recreations: shooting, fishing, golf. Address: 43 Brook Crescent, W.1.—Well, he's less verbose and full of himself than most of them."

"Does he mention how many grouse he once killed in a day?" asked the manager. "Recrea-



tions : mangling birds, beasts, fishes and golf balls. Imagine confessing to it ! What he wants to bother with us for I cannot conceive, said the duchess. But go and see him."

The secretary thereupon rang up 43 Brook Crescent, and was told that Mr. Benchley would be glad to see him at half-past three that afternoon.

Precisely at that hour the secretary was shown into a large, quietly furnished, sedately appointed room, and Mr. Benchley got up to greet him.

"It's very good of you to come," he said.

The secretary found himself not quite at his ease. For one thing he was somewhat taken aback by Mr. Benchley's appearance. He had expected to find a hearty, rubicund, confident Mass Murderer ; instead he saw before him a pale, soft-voiced neurasthenic. Well, perhaps not so bad as that, but he looked ill and strained about the eyes, and he had some nervous tricks—staring so hard at his boot—and then that occasional and discomfiting sudden throwing up of his hands towards his head, a very noticeable and obviously involuntary trick, though he half controlled it.

"I imagine," said Mr. Benchley, "that you are very curious as to my reasons for asking you to come to-day. You probably know me, if you know me at all, as the incarnation of a kind of cruelty ; that is badly phrased, but you know what I mean, a

blood-sportsman, to adapt an epithet of Shaw's. So I have been, but the past tense is appropriate, for I do not intend to merit that epithet ever again."

As he said this his hands once again jumped towards his head, were controlled and brought down again. He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Officially at least, we do not attack or concern ourselves with fishing, shooting or hunting," replied the secretary guardedly. "Many of our members shoot, fish and hunt."

"I know that," said Mr. Benchley, staring fixedly at the toe of his shoe. "All the same I have fired my last shot and caught my last fish. I fired my last shot exactly a month ago. Do you have many cases of so sudden a conversion?"

"I've known quite a few," answered the secretary. "In fact in a little way I am such a case myself; I shot when I was young and enjoyed it."

"Have you ever in a sense enjoyed anything more?"

"In a limited sense, no."

"Then why did you give it up?"

"Well," said the secretary, "I found that the memory of the movements and sounds made by the animals I had wounded remained with me. I used to dream of them. But besides that, I suppose I grew up *sensitively* as it were." He would

have expanded this remark slightly if it had not been for the fact that Mr. Benchley threw his hands up again, which distracted him.

“ I believe,” said Mr. Benchley, “ that the sensitiveness to which you refer is an unchallengeable symptom of intellectual, and to some extent, moral superiority. Highly sensitive people are ahead of their time. A general quickening of sensitiveness in a race is equivalent to a general refinement of its civilisation. One day, it may be, to kill an animal for amusement will be considered an act of flagrant indecency, as serious an offence as wearing a white tie with a dinner jacket. As a matter of fact my conversion was not quite as abrupt as it seems. My father shot all his life, and I killed my first rabbit when I was twelve. It seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. But I can recall certain more or less short-lived premonitions that it wouldn’t always seem so natural. Every now and again I felt disgusted and uncertain, and these occasions became more and more frequent until that day a month ago. On that day I had certain experiences, experiences I had had before, but they suddenly seemed vile and harrowing, unendurable, intolerable. As a result of them I had a mild form of nervous breakdown. I have been in the doctor’s hands for the last month—I am better now, but not entirely cured, I’m afraid. It sounds an absurd

question, but can you see any mark, any stain of any kind on the toe of my right shoe?" He pushed it forward.

The secretary made rather a business of deciding this point, for he was not feeling too comfortable. "None whatever," he replied with great emphasis, after a close scrutiny.

"I thought not," replied Mr. Benchley; "it is simply that I have been a little worried about my eyesight since that trouble a month ago. I quite realise," he continued, "that it would probably split your society from top to bottom if it attempted to tackle the shooting-hunting problem, and the money I am going to give it will be given unconditionally. At the same time I should prefer that some of it at least was expended in furthering the following causes. I will put all this in writing, of course.

"Firstly: To put pressure on the Government to bring in a Bill making it compulsory for all drivers of horse vehicles to pass an examination in horse-mastership before they are allowed to drive.

"Secondly: I should like a certain percentage of this money to be devoted to the discovery of a humane trap for rabbits.

"Thirdly: To inquire temperately and impartially into the vivisection question.

"Fourthly: To put pressure on the Government,

by arousing public opinion, concerning the export overseas of old horses. Any money within reason you want for rest-homes for such horses will be forthcoming.

“ That will do for a start, and now I will give you a cheque.” He went to his bureau and fetched it.

When the secretary saw the figures his eyes grew wide and he began to utter fervent expressions of gratitude, to which Mr. Benchley put, almost rudely, an immediate stop.

When the secretary was out in the street again, he set off whistling and swinging his cane. “ That old bird gave me the ‘ willies ’ for some reason or other,” he said to himself. “ There’s something slightly ‘ dunno-what ’ about him. Who cares ! It’s his money we want ! He seems extremely tame. I can imagine him allowing a really fierce snipe to bite his ear. Who cares ! It’s his money we want ! ”

After he had left, Mr. Benchley opened and shut his right hand many times, and he did this to convince himself that he no longer had the sensation that he was gripping something warm and feathered which writhed slightly whenever his nails met his palm.

A few days later his drawing-room was transformed into a highly efficient office, with a secretary and three plain but serviceable typists, all of whom were kept exceedingly busy. After they had been

at it for three weeks the first-fruits of their labours were seen in the shape of a column long letter to *The Times* signed by their employer. In this he had the cool nerve to suggest that, as a result of many years' desultory, and a few weeks concentrated, examination of the subject, he had come to the conclusion that the utilitarian arguments for hunting and shooting were completely fallacious. He himself had shot all his life, though he had now given up doing so, but he realised he had shot simply and solely because he had found killing animals amusing; obeying a potent, savage impulse. Many people, he believed, salved their consciences when they inflicted gross pain on animals by reflecting that, "someone had got to do it." In his opinion *no one* had got to do it. And an elaborately documented argument followed.

This bombshell started one of the most heated and copious controversies in the history of Press debate, for this discordant chatter spread from *The Times* and rippled out over the length and breadth of the British Isles, and wherever two or three were gathered together, the introduction of this tinder topic made for fiery dissension. Mr. Benchley's former friends shook compassionate fists in protest. "The poor old dotard! Incipient senile decay! Nervous breakdown! "Blood pressure! Piffing sentimentality! Hopeless bunk!" Such were the

exclamatory refutations with which they repudiated such sloppy heresy. Yet he did not lack adherents, and the skirmish swirled into a battle, and the battle surged into a campaign. Mr. Benchley's post-bag was worthy of a film-star's, though he had few requests for signed photographs; but every communication which deserved one received a courteous, if usually and necessarily a controversial, reply. He had always had the capacity to write concisely; now controlled passion lent him a style, so that his short contributions to sympathetic weekly papers were well worthy of their polished company. These little papers usually took the form of impressionist sketches of incidents he had witnessed during his sporting career; vignettes of animals' terror and pain, very often. Sometimes they were dispassionate little studies of the psychology of those responsible for that terror and pain. One and all made a curious impression of authenticity, and many of great horror and distress.

Throughout all this time Mr. Benchley kept himself entirely aloof from his fellow-men. His former friends had no more wish to meet him than he had to meet them. And he was in no mood to make new friends. He worked ten hours a day, making up for much lost time. He left his business to his partner. The secretary dined with him once a week to report progress and plan schemes for the



future. He became gradually acclimatised to his host's eccentricities, for which he made St. Vitus responsible. Mr. Benchley still continued at intervals most fixedly and urgently to regard certain apparently blank spots on the wall or the tablecloth, and once in a while he flung his hands up to his head, but he no longer seemed so unnecessarily preoccupied with the toe of his shoe. St. Vitus had yielded a point. He had observed correctly, the explanation being that Mr. Benchley no longer was compelled to accept the fact that he could see a small splashed globe of blood on the toe of his shoe. This visual relief coincided with the patenting of an efficient humane rabbit trap and the initiation of a campaign to make its use compulsory. The bitter controversy started by Mr. Benchley's letters gradually died down as he had realised it would, but it left, nevertheless, certain permanent results, revealed, not so much by a perceptible but probably temporary decrease in the number of those who hunted and shot, as in a general intensification of that uncertainty and unease which had always troubled humane persons at the thought of at what expense they took their pleasure, a slight moving of the waters of sensitive perception. He was ahead of his time, but his teaching was not merely ridiculed. It was frantically assailed by some, its sincerity was grudgingly conceded by others, it was fervently

welcomed as a potent aperient for the bowels of compassion by those who had long laboured in the same cause against apparently hopeless odds.

It was on the day that *The Times* announced it could no longer extend the hospitality of its columns to the debate that Mr. Benchley found himself most blessedly free from another ocular bother. That swollen, red blob which always reminded him so horribly of the pulped eye of a rabbit no longer imprinted itself on flat surfaces, and remained there, as it were staring aloofly at him. This, he had hoped *subjective* appearance, had been both frequent and regular, but like shell-fire its effect on his mind increased rather than diminished with repetition.

The day after he was freed from this eccentricity, all the windows on the ground-floor of his house were broken by persons unknown, and some abusive phrases were painted on his front door, a gesture charitably attributed to medical students. This was quite probable, for the society's inquiry into the pros and cons of vivisection had brought some uncomfortable facts to the light, and it was generally known that Mr. Benchley had been at the back of this inquest. He heard the succession of crashes just as he was reading a report from the secretary stating that, since the date when he had first interested himself in its affairs, the subscriptions and donations received by the society had increased four

hundred per cent., that a grant of £10,000 had been made to the affiliated society in Spain, and that the long over-due fight against the torture of the Indian Water Buffalo was about to be begun with adequate financial support. Mr. Benchley felt that those crashes rather appropriately signalled these announcements. A little later the society announced that a certain person, who desired to remain anonymous, had subscribed £5,000 to it to form the nucleus of a special Benchley Fund to be devoted to the further education of the public in regard to Blood Sports.

The fund reached £20,000 in a week. On the last day of that week, Mr. Benchley ceased to fling his hands up towards his ears at regular intervals, for he no longer felt that agonised scream suddenly shake on their drums. Nevertheless, he went to bed that night feeling utterly exhausted and ill. The next morning he couldn't get up, and when the doctor came he diagnosed pulmonary pneumonia and engaged day and night nurses.

Up to the crisis, Mr. Benchley fought for his life, for he had much still to do, but he had undermined his powers of resistance by insensate overwork, and presently he knew he could fight no more. After that he relapsed into gradually lengthening periods of unconsciousness. When he realised he was dying he sent for the secretary, to whom he gave certain instructions regarding the use of the

fortune he was leaving to the society. The secretary had come to regard Mr. Benchley as a very great man, and when he had shaken hands with him, and said good-bye and left him, there were tears in his eyes as he swung his cane jauntily.

The doctor came about four o'clock and made his examination. He took the nurse out from the sick-room with him, and shrugging his shoulders said, "There is nothing more to be done. He may last one hour or twelve."

"I'm wanted for another case to-morrow," said the nurse. "Will it be safe for me to accept it?"

"Oh, yes, he can't possibly last through the night. He refuses to have any more oxygen. I can't help respecting him, though I know he financed that damn-fool inquiry."

During his periods of unconsciousness Mr. Benchley had dreams. In one of them he seemed to be watching a small excited boy who was staring across a surging field of corn over which a windhover was poised against the gale. And suddenly it lifted and soared over the bordering trees, a dark speck against the green, and disappeared. This dream recurred three times. And then he awoke full of a great weakness and a certain sense of peace. The nurse had gone out to pack her bag. The fire was alive but dying, just one still pregnant coal was thrusting forth lazy, lolling flames which slightly darkened

the shadows. Mr. Benchley was just about to surrender again to that overmastering weariness when it seemed to him that something leapt lightly on to the bed beside him, something which turned and faced him. And at first one of its eyes was clear, and the other bleeding and broken. With an effort he turned his head towards it, and then he saw that both its eyes were bright and whole again. And it nestled to his side. And after a little while something else fluttered up on to the blanket, something which for a moment trailed a wing and writhed, and then settled itself down beside him, trimly and stealthily. The flames died down, but there was just enough light left to enable Mr. Benchley to catch the outline of something big and brown which dragged its hind legs towards him. Mr. Benchley tried with all his might to get his hands to his ears, and he shut his eyes. But the silence was unbroken and he opened them again, and that big, brown shadow moved easily towards him and tucked itself down beside his arm. And then the fire shook itself slightly and the room was dark. And Mr. Benchley, feeling three little pressures against him, rallied his failing strength, and just succeeded in moving his right hand over and down, and it closed over two long, soft ears, which twitched gently, as if with pleasure. And a moment later Mr. Benchley fell asleep.

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*“LOOK UP THERE!”*

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“LOOK UP THERE!”

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WHY *did* he always stare up? And why did he so worry Mr. Packard by doing it? The latter had come to Brioni to read and to rest, and to take the bare minimum of notice of his fellow-men. Doctor's orders! And here he was pre-occupied, almost obsessed, by the garish idiosyncrasy of this tiny, hen-eyed fellow. He was not a taking specimen of humanity, for his forehead was high and receding, his nose beaked fantastically and the skin stretched so tightly across it that it seemed as if it might be ripped apart at any moment. Then, he had a long, thin-lipped mouth always slightly open, and a pointed beard which, like his hair, was fussy and unkempt. He was for ever in the company of a stalwart yokel—a south-country enlisted Guardsman to the life; a slow-moving, massive, red-faced plebeian who seemed a master of the desirable art of aphasia, for no word ever seemed to pass his lips. But, good heavens! how he ploughed and furrowed the menu!

Mr. Packard was a very important Civil servant, and, contrary to the opinion of the vulgar, Civil servants sometimes overwork. The notion that

they arrive at their offices just in time for lunch, and return again to them just in time to sign a few letters and catch a train home, is a fantasy derived from newspapers, and therefore from newspaper proprietors—idle fellows as a rule, for all they have to do is to propagate ideas and employ other people to carry them out. Anyone can have ideas; it is the carrying them out which means work. Mr. Packard had ideas, usually very judicious and admirable ideas, and he also had to carry them out, which meant work—eventually overwork, a threatened nervous breakdown, peremptory advice from a specialist, and three months' leave. He had been recommended Brioni in June because it was between seasons for that green and placid isle, and there was plenty of sun; gentle breezes blown over a purple sea, very purple, very warm, very salt; a golf course, with seven short holes, and a reasonable tariff. Perched primly in the Adriatic, it offered every possible advantage, every chance of speedy convalescence to an overworked bachelor fifty-two years of age, with nothing whatsoever organically wrong with him. So Mr. Packard had found it till his eye had been caught by this curious couple: one who never spoke, but stolidly filled his belly, the other who was no more communicative, and for ever stared upwards at an angle of thirty-five degrees, for such Mr. Packard, after an exasper-

ating calculation, estimated it to be. On the first occasion he had noticed him, Mr. Packard had instinctively stared up also, wondering what object of interest was to be found on the bare, brimstone-tinted wall of the dining-room at an angle of thirty-five degrees about. But there was nothing. Yet this midget had continued to gaze up, even while eating his fish and emptying his glass. And his companion, that burly proletarian, appeared entirely unconcerned. Again Mr. Packard's eyes tilted in sympathy, only to encounter a bare brimstone wall. It then occurred to him that this angular obsession must be of long standing, for its victim most expertly neutralised what must have been a heavy handicap to accurate feeding by an impressive dexterity in the manipulation of knives and forks and spoons, though his appetite seemed as slender as his physical frame.

So stern and uncompromising had been the specialist's fiat, that Mr. Packard had been genuinely alarmed about his nerves; so much so that he almost entertained the possibility that this upward-peering absurdity was a figment of his disordered imagination—a very unlovely thought—but he had dismissed it with a very comforting reassurance when he saw that others among the sparse company then visiting Brioni were also puzzled by this singular prepossession of the hen-eyed fellow.

What an incongruous couple they were! And why didn't the lusty rustic turn his eyes up too—or do something about it? Well, let him take a leaf out of his book, and pay no regard to what was none of his business, and certainly no part of his cure.

If the fellow wanted to stare up, let him. So, by making a considerable effort, Mr. Packard looked away. All the same, he was charged with a tantalising and hard-to-exorcise curiosity about this couple, their circumstances, the connection between them—all this—but, above all, why the devil the tiny one stared up. Knowing such wonderings could only delay the healing of the lesion in his nervous system, he made quite elaborate plans for avoiding the pair. He changed the times of his meals, and if he saw them in a room he went to another, and if he observed them coming towards him he turned on his heel. By these means he freed his mind of them to some extent, but a sneaking, insidious inquisitiveness endured. However, the sun and air and peace of Brioni rapidly restored him, and once again he slept an unbroken eight hours; he found himself with such an appetite as he had not known for twenty years, and the idea that there was someone standing just behind him all the time—a very irritating symptom, this—most absolutely and blessedly ceased. So, reassuringly

soon, his inner eye began to turn longingly to a snug though austere office in Whitehall, with neatly raised pyramids of "jackets" and official documents of undeniable secrecy and import. And to that leisurely stroll up to the club at one o'clock so punctually, and that carefully chosen little lunch, and perhaps a game of chess with Lenton, some gossip, and a leisurely stroll back to the Home Office, where there would be decisions to make, questions in the House to consider, a feeling of slight but pleasing importance, and all that regulated system and ordered regime which suited him temperamentally so perfectly.

A holiday in August seemed a justifiable weakness to him, but to idle about in dreamy, flushing, dark-green islands in June was abnormal—a process which should not be prolonged for an unnecessary second. He would stick it out for a week or two longer, and count the days till the hour of his release should strike—release from indolence, strolling about, and from an inclination to uneasy, vague surmisings concerning an ill-assorted couple, one of whom for ever raised his eyes in a sort of viewless intensity, and the other who never spoke but was for ever at his side.

On the evening before his departure, about six o'clock, Mr. Packard strolled along the path through the holm oaks towards the bathing place and sat

down on a seat overlooking the shadowed and darkening straits of the Istrian shore. Shadowed and darkening because a slowly marshalling army of clouds was rising above the Dolomites and frowning down over Trieste. The sun, resisting and not yet overpowered, hurled red and gold shafts up through the advancing host. The spectacle had a certain sombre sublimity, and its leisurely shifting pattern pleasantly absorbed Mr. Packard's attention, so much so that when a rather high-pitched and deliberate voice remarked, "Some persons have found in such spectacles evidence of the existence of a God," he started abruptly and half rose from his seat. He must have been half-asleep, for he found sitting on the same seat beside him that enigmatic pair, the little one next to him and the yokel—on his other side—smoking a pipe and staring out to sea. Mr. Packard was irritated and taken by surprise, but his natural good manners and subconscious curiosity prevented him from uttering the tart and "snubby" retort which half rose to his lips. Instead, he said dryly, "The particular deity concerned is most certainly Jupiter Pluvius. I imagine that Trieste will get the full benefit of that storm soon and it will be our turn in an hour or so."

"From your tone," suggested the little man, "I judge you are of a sceptical turn of mind."

(" And what the devil has it got to do with you if I am? ") thought Mr. Packard. " If you mean," he said, " that I do not see why all that is beautiful should be put to the credit of what you call ' God,' that is so. For in whom do you lodge the responsibility for the somewhat less palatable spectacles provided by bull-fights and battle-fields? Unless you are a dualist."

" Very possibly I am," said the little man, staring up at the fading sun, now drowning in a majestically pacing cloud ocean.

" Well," said Mr. Packard, " it will be the devil's turn soon enough. Storms in this region are no joke."

" I think I have reason to believe in the devil," continued the little man, taking off his rusty panama and placing it on the ground beside him. As he said this the yokel looked at him sharply, then knocked out his pipe on his boot and began filling it again from an aluminium box.

" Oh, indeed," replied Mr. Packard, his curiosity rising. " I have myself deduced him logically, but I take it you have had a closer view of him."

" Yes," answered the little man, his eyes on the rim of the advancing storm, " I think I can say that. Would you like to hear about it? "

" Certainly," said Mr. Packard.

" I'm glad of that, because it is a relief to me to



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*"LOOK UP THERE!"*

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tell it now and again. Does Gauntry Hall convey anything to you? "

"Gauntry Hall," repeated Mr. Packard uncertainly. "The name seems vaguely familiar."

"It was a famous show place burnt down in 1904. I was there that night."

"Oh, I remember now," said Mr. Packard. "Middle Tudor, near Leicester, famous chiefly for its Long Gallery; and wasn't there some legend about it? "

"Yes," replied the little man; "and the fact that you can recall so much is a great tribute to your memory."

"Oh, I was rather keen on that period once upon a time when I was less busy."

"I went up to Oxford the same term as Jack Gauntry, and to the same college—Oriel," continued the little man, his eyes narrowed and shifting and busy with the sky. "In those days I was keenly interested in the occult: I believe it to have been somewhat of a pose—a dangerous pose. I knew there was some queer story about Gauntry Hall, and made up my mind I would get Jack to tell me about it; not a very creditable ambition, but I was young and foolish, and I have been punished enough. We became great friends, and one evening I had my chance. He came up to my rooms rather late one night, late in November

1896, after dining out. He was a little drunk, and still thirsty. I filled him up, and finally brought the subject round to Gauntry Hall.

“ ‘ Funny you should mention it,’ he said; ‘ my people did the annual trek to London to-day.’ ”

“ ‘ How do you mean—“ annual trek ”? ’ I asked.

“ He did not answer for a moment, and I could see he was torn between two impulses—one to cleanse his bosom of this family obsession, the other to keep his mouth dutifully shut. So I gave him another whisky-and-soda. He drank it in a gulp and then became muzzy and garrulous. I could see he would find relief in being unrestrainedly indiscreet. I’m not boring you? ”

“ Not in the least,” Mr. Packard reassured him.

“ Well, suddenly Jack blurted out, ‘ No one’s allowed to be in the house New Year’s Eve.’ ”

“ ‘ Why not? ’ ”

“ ‘ Oh, because the Bogey Man gets busy then. As a matter of fact, no one is supposed to have spent New Year’s Eve at Gauntry for three hundred years. So as not to make it too conspicuous, we always clear out during the last week in November. Perhaps it’s all bosh—I sometimes wonder. Any way, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’m slightly tight, and shall tell you some more.’ ”

“ I was feeling rather ashamed of myself, and it

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*"LOOK UP THERE!"*

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was on the tip of my tongue to shut him up. But I didn't.

" 'No one's allowed there on New Year's Eve, but early next morning old Carrow, the butler—the Carrows have been in our service for years and years—comes to the house and opens all the windows one after the other and shuts them again—the hell of a job. All but one, the one in the middle of the first floor of the south wing. And out of this one he has to hang a white silk banner which is in the Long Gallery and wave it three times very slowly, and then—shall I tell you what he has to do then? '

" 'No,' I said, for I knew I was hearing what I should not and that I should be bitterly repentant if I let him go on. 'Shut up, and I'll forget what you've told me.'

"This seemed to sober him up. 'Yes, I hope you will,' he replied, and got up and left the room. We never referred to the subject again.

"I spent half the summer vac. at Gauntry Hall for the four years I was 'up.' It was an exquisite house, gloriously placed, and the grounds were perfection. But you remember it, so I need not describe it. Sir John and Lady Gauntry were sweet survivals from an easier age—a type which began to disappear with the introduction of modern plumbing from America. They were rather slow and faded, their manners were a heritage, their

benign suzerainty over the local serfs and villeins a sharp reminder that there was something in consonance with society in the Feudal System. Well, they are dust by now. I grew to love the old place. Its atmosphere seemed so placid, untroubled, unshakable in those long, lovely summer days that I could hardly believe it was ever visited by a curious winter spell; that it ever could cease to drowse and become most malignantly awake. The subject was never alluded to within its walls, but I remember I used to find my eyes wandering up to that window in the middle of the south wing. Yes, I used to find myself looking up—that was all. At least, I think that was all, though one evening when I was taking a stroll after dinner I happened to glance up at this window, and for a second it seemed as if something white fluttered from it and disappeared. But it may have been a projection from my own mind.

“And then came the Boer War, and Jack went out with his Yeomanry and was killed on the Modder. The shock drove the old couple into complete seclusion, and they died within a few days of each other early in 1903. Meanwhile, I had completely lost touch with Gauntry Hall. And then one day I met Teller, the agent, in the street and he lunched with me. He told me the estate had been leased to people called Relf, *nouveaux riches*. Young

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*“LOOK UP THERE!”*

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Relf was the son of a millionaire multiple-shop owner in the North, and he had married some little vulgarian. Teller utterly despised these town-bred parvenus and considered their occupation of Gauntry defiling and almost intolerable.

“ ‘But they may not be there much longer,’ he said, ‘for the damn fools are going to spend New Year’s Eve in the house.’

“ ‘What!’ I cried.

“ ‘Oh, yes,’ he replied; ‘they are greatly looking forward to it. I felt it my duty to warn them, but I might have saved myself the trouble, for when I had said my piece, that little barmaid, Mrs. Relf, who looks like a painted Pekinese, clapped her hands on her knees and declared she simply adored ghosts—didn’t believe in them a bit, would have a house-party for the occasion, and wish a very Happy New Year to whoever or whatever came. I reminded her she was preparing to break a rule which had lasted for three hundred years. “Quite time it *was* broken,” said she. So I shrugged my shoulders and gave it up. I wish them luck!’

“ ‘All the same,’ I said, ‘it’s one of the most interesting pieces of news I’ve heard for a long time.’

“ ‘Well, if you think that, why don’t you make one of the party?’ asked Teller, laughing.

“ ‘How could I? I don’t know them.’

" ' Oh, that doesn't matter. They're very partial to peers.' "

" I was about to say ' No ' most emphatically when I was seized by a most violent temptation. Here were these fools prepared to put this most ancient and vague and famous mystery to the test. It was a unique opportunity. Dangerous? Yes, probably, but the old house had always seemed friendly to me. Here was I, a professed student of the occult, presented with a glorious opportunity for investigation. If I failed to take it I should never forgive myself nor have any respect for myself. I imagine you can sympathise with my feelings to some extent."

" Oh, yes," replied Mr. Packard; " no doubt I should have done as I infer you did."

" Yes, I accepted."

As the little man said this Mr. Packard noticed the yokel glance across at him, and as their eyes met it seemed as though the fellow wished to convey a message of some sort. A warning, was it?

" Yes," continued the little man. " I accepted. Teller fixed up the invitation for me, and I reached Leicester Station about 5.30 on New Year's Eve twenty-three years ago. The moment I got into the trap and we began to drive eastward through rows of dingy villas, I began to feel a nervous irritation which steadily increased as we drove towards

Gauntry. It was a foul night, blowing very hard, and sleeting, and every yard we travelled made me wish the more I hadn't come. I could feel the influence of Gauntry reaching out and attempting to repel me. I'd have gone straight back to the station but for one thing. Supposing I funked it and nothing happened. That story might get round, which wouldn't have been pleasant. All the same, when we reached the house, it took all my resolution to cross its threshold. The old place had always seemed so friendly and welcoming before; now it was sullen, and utterly hostile. I felt as if I were a traitor, as if I had been caught by my best friend in the act of forging his name. I was so seized by dread and nervously unstrung that I hardly noticed the rest of the party. I remember there were ten of us, five women and five men, and that they all appeared to be young, noisy and vulgar—so noisy that I was convinced they had had a good many of the primitive cocktails which they were drinking as I arrived, and presently I knew they were almost as full of dread and as unstrung as myself. The house seemed throbbing with a sinister rhythm. It seemed as if it had summoned the great wind which leaped at it in gigantic gusts. By coming there that day I had incurred its malignant enmity, and with cold austerity it was bidding me begone. I had my old room in the east wing,



but when I went up to dress, it was as though an almost materialised force was disputing my entry. I had to breast my way through it as through a hostile tide. I found they had decided to dine in the Great Hall instead of the dining-room—why, I don't know. Round it ran a balcony from which a door led through to the famous Long Gallery. When we sat down I knew them all to be suffering from an acute spiritual malaise, and that what they had drunk, far from lulling their sensitiveness to the power which menaced them, had but weakened their resistance to it. How soon will the storm break? "

"In ten minutes or so," replied Mr. Packard. "I am surprised it has not broken before now. It is reserving all its venom for us."

"Then I may have just time to finish. I do not remember whether I spoke a word throughout that meal, but I do know that I was under such a strain that I had to grip my chair to stop myself running from the room. The women were on the verge of hysteria, the men drank feverishly and, as time went on, a dreadful vague, inane babble came from all of them. The woman on my right—she had a high, thin voice—suddenly gulped down a full glass of champagne, some of which swilled over her chin and neck, and shouted : ' Well, when does it begin ? ' and then went off into peals of hysterical laughter.

We did not move from the table, and from half-past ten onwards, Relf kept getting up to ring the bell, but no servant appeared. ‘Where are those bloody slaves?’ he cried each time, and staggered back to the table and filled his glass again. From half-past eleven I was no longer master of myself. The room was thick with smoke which wreathed itself into fantastic patterns. The pressure grew unendurable, and suddenly my resistance broke, and I ran from the great hall up to my room and lay cowering on my bed. I could still hear the crazy, chaotic babble from those I had left, and then a great bell crashed out. *One-two-three*—and each mighty stroke followed so hard on its predecessor that the vile jangle almost seemed an undivided sound. It was as if a murderer was hammering in my brain. Suddenly it ceased, and I heard no sound from below, and then came one high, piercing scream from a woman: ‘Look up there!’ and then every light in the house went out.

“Well, when that happened I groped round the room for my electric torch. At last I found it, and I think if I had not found it just then I should have suffered even more than I have suffered. I staggered downstairs and into the Great Hall, and flashed the lamp on the table. They were all sitting rigidly, their eyes looking up and focussed on the door into the Long Gallery. I peered into their

faces one by one. Their eyes were wide, yet drawn in, as though asquint; their heads were strained back on their shoulders; their mouths were open, and foam was on their lips. And then I flashed my torch up towards the door into the Long Gallery, and there—and there——"

The cloud army had advanced so far that it was looming down on them. Two striding horns of vapour preceded it. As the little man cried "and there—and there——" a blinding flash leapt from one to the other, so that these enflamed and curled tentacles drove down at them, or so it seemed most terrifyingly to Mr. Packard, and the rending crash of thunder which followed hard upon it hurled its echoes round the world. And then, with inchoate fury, the storm drove forward to the attack. And then the little man leapt to his feet and flung his arms above his head and screamed out as though in agony: "Look up there! Look up there!" Mr. Packard moved towards him, but in a second the yokel had him by the shoulders. "Leave him to me," he shouted against the thunder, "I know what to do." And he began to propel the little man before him. Mr. Packard, oblivious of the rain, stared after them. With a horrid regularity the little man flung up his arms and screamed: "Look up there!" and presently they turned a corner and disappeared, and the screams grew fainter. For a

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*"LOOK UP THERE!"*

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moment Mr. Packard stared upwards too, and then, as another flash speared down to the sea, he came to himself, and turning up the collar of his coat, started to run through the blinding rain back to the hotel.

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*“WRITTEN IN OUR FLESH”*

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“WRITTEN IN OUR FLESH”

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MR. TIMOTHY FRONE put down his pencil. It was true, he supposed, that one could write poetry, he knew it was true that one could write prose, *de profundis*, but only a human type-writer could pen newspaper paragraphs about inane and despicable minutiae when his heart was in his boots. He couldn't, anyway, though his next meal—his very life—depended upon it. But was he so anxious to live? Three weeks ago he had been, when he had first seen his novel on sale at Mr. Denny's shop in the Strand, and then a little later at the bookstall at Waterloo. He had bought three copies—all he could afford—to encourage the others—the price of a paragraph. That first excitement and tempered elation over, he had waited desperately for news. He had longed to ring up his publishers to learn how it was going. But he had waited three weeks and then gone round to see them, and had sat trembling in the waiting-room till his summons had come. The Senior Partner received him with resigned and practised amiability. “Not very good news, I'm afraid, Mr. Frone,” he said, holding out his cigarette case.



And Mr. Frone had said, “ Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” and he had fixed his eyes on a pile of manuscripts on Mr. Dickinson’s table which seemed to be wavering slightly like an earthquake-shaken pagoda.

“ Can’t get the reviews,” continued Mr. Dickinson. “ As you know I have always believed in your novel, but it is impossible for a book, however distinguished, to make its way unless the reviewers help it. We have advertised it, of course, but a book by an unknown writer cannot be helped much by advertising unless we can append to the bare announcement of its publication some extracts from a favourable review by a well-known critic.”

“ No, I realise that,” said Mr. Frone; “ isn’t it selling at all? ”

“ We subscribed two hundred and twenty copies—to such depths has the novel business sunk ! We have had small repeats here and there, but I’m afraid the total is not yet three hundred.”

“ Then it’s what you would call a hopeless dud, I suppose? ” said Mr. Frone.

Mr. Dickinson looked down at his fingers, which were tapping his desk.

“ Oh, it’s too soon to pronounce quite such a depressing verdict as that, and, as I have said, I know it to be good work. It just wants a push and then it would start to sell. For example, if Reginald

Stall were to mention it favourably in one of his Wireless talks I am certain we should sell at least five thousand copies.”

“Oh, really,” said Mr. Frone, “is he so influential as all that?”

“Most certainly he is. He can make or break, but he can only break by keeping silence, for even a slating from him is very much better than nothing. Yet there is no man whose opinion I less respect. All the same, you can’t manage anything in that direction, I suppose?”

“I’m very much afraid not. I have a friend on the *Banner* who knows him, but he told me that Mr. Stall never notices any book if he is asked to do so.”

“Unless the suppliant has a handle to his or her name,” rejoined the publisher dryly.

“Well, then, I suppose there is nothing I can do,” said Mr. Frone.

“Only by mobilising any journalistic influence you may possess. I have been in this game too long to retain any illusions. I’d rather be a Charles Garvice with good Press backing than a Joseph Conrad without any. The best may come to the top, but the upward pressure from the right friends in the right newspaper offices is the easiest way for it to do so. Perhaps that is too cynical, but the publication of fiction is not calculated to foster

credulous optimism. However, we must hope for the best."

"Poor little devil," thought Mr. Dickinson when Mr. Frone had gone; "he always reminds me of a small bird with a broken wing."

It was the impression left by this interview which had frustrated Mr. Frone's attempts to make much headway with "A Day in the Life of Queen Souriya," although the editor of the *Echo* had been quite enthusiastic, and for three chatty paragraphs on the subject had offered to pay £1 17s. 6d. = one week's rent and seven meals. But Mr. Frone lacked the heart to improvise.

The room in which he lived and worked and slept was the epitome of utter and shameless shabbiness. Had it been on the top floor it would have been quite unarguably a garret. He looked round it, and a sense of final disgust and defeat and nauseating repulsion surged through him; such as greatly oppresses those with the instincts of gentlemen—however simple their tastes—when squalor is their inevitable portion and somehow they feel they have not quite deserved it. And then there was a rap on the door and Mr. Waller thrust his vital, bustling person into the room.

"I've got news for you Tim," he exclaimed, "very, very good news. Stall is going to review your book from 2LO to-night."

Mr. Frone's heart gave a hard thump, missed three beats, so that he leaned forward quickly to get his breath, and then began working spasmodically and uncertainly, and he had to cough sharply to disguise the fact that this rather urgent inconvenience was troubling him.

"Well, that is good news," he said; "are you sure?" (How desperately he wanted to be sure.)

"Yes, quite. He was in the office to-day and asked me to tell him about you, as he was very impressed with the book. I filled him up with the right stuff I can assure you. I asked his typist afterwards, and she said you were down for to-night for certain."

"It certainly will make a difference," said Mr. Frone. "I've been feeling rather depressed about it. It hasn't begun to sell yet, and I was afraid it was destined to be a hopeless failure."

"Well, you needn't worry any more; you're a made man. Every library will be clamouring for copies to-morrow morning, and your publishers' Trade Department will look as if it had been hit by a hurricane."

"I'd like to hear what he has to say," said Mr. Frone.

"Then come along to my rooms to-night. My wireless set is primitive, but it usually functions."

"That's awfully good of you. What time shall I come?"

"The rag-time pundit clears his throat precisely at 9.25. Come along at nine and we'll have a drink to to-morrow's Best Seller," said Mr. Waller, and he dashed away on one of his many occasions.

When he had gone Mr. Frone put his hand to his left side. Good heavens ! how his heart was going, it seemed to leap, die and then struggle and stutter. That was what the doctor had meant by saying he must avoid sudden strains and shocks, but he couldn't have meant such wonderful shocks as this ; no one could die from hearing such news as that. He must go out, he couldn't sit still. He walked to St. James's Park and leaned over the bridge. Small beady-eyed ducks looked expectantly up at him, and then dived, necks strained forward, gleaning stray scraps of fodder from the lake's bottom. Trim, cruising gulls cocked their heads and screamed nervously at him ; a gusty breeze raised tiny waves, and a pair of mallards planed down, raised a spray flurry and shook their tails.

Mr. Frone's heart regained its rhythm, his tingling nervousness subsided, and he sat down on a bench overlooking the water. What a blessed relief to be able to think about his book again. Ever since he had felt in his bones it was a failure he had been unable to recall it to his mind without almost physical nausea. The years he had spent upon it ! In a sense he had given his life to it, conceived it,

borne it, lived with it and known that it was good. He would probably never write another. He knew that he was not a natural novelist, he was too autobiographical, his imaginative power and impulse were sluggish and feeble, and writing a book was a great and agonising ordeal for a person of his intellectual type. If only all the careless people who read a novel a day could realise the sheer, maddening, torturing difficulty of finding words with which to say just what one wanted to say and just as one wanted to say it! One had a sense of death when one wrote "finis." A stage of life was past, a child had been born, a purpose fulfilled, and simultaneously came nostalgia, exhaustion, a sense of nearing death. Perhaps that was only true of novels as autobiographical as his, wherein one's consciousness attempted the miracle of explaining itself to itself. What had it really done? Seen itself in a glass darkly—caught a glimpse, a fleeting glimpse, of reality—certainly it had obeyed an urgent instruction, whatever its origin, whatever its justification. Possibly it was just trying to draw a pig with one's eye shut. Anyhow, when one had done it, one longed, for some obscure reason, to have an audience, even for something so personal and subjective and so self-compelled. That was rather a mystery. The author always wishes for company, always longs to get that warming, quickening certainty that some-

one is saying to himself as he reads, "I understand. We're in the same boat, even if we're just sinking together." How brutal then, how remorselessly brutal, to know that all had been for nothing, that the audience was amusing itself elsewhere, that one had written an absolute and unsaleable dud. That was how he had felt, but he needn't feel it any longer. By this time to-morrow, if what his publishers said was true, and it surely must be, the audience would be eagerly assembling and some of them would be beginning to say, "I understand," and that lifelong loneliness of his would be passing away, that spiritual loneliness. And he'd have money enough for two rooms, no more vile degrading hack prostitution, perhaps enough even to travel—not that he'd even learn properly how to spend money, for you couldn't teach poor old dogs new expensive tricks. Yes, now he could think of his book with a most blessed feeling of happiness and hope and confidence. After all it wasn't so bad. Here and there he had contrived just the effect he had aimed at. It was not too well-constructed perhaps, but well enough; and certain episodes had leaped to life, and he was certain that here and there he had done just precisely what he had tried to do. What had recommended it to this so miracle-working an oracle as Mr. Stall? He must have hundreds of novels to choose from, so that the very



few he selected to review must have seized his attention in some sharp and dominating way. Was there anything in *Written in our Flesh* to attract so eclectic and godlike an authority? Heaven knew he was modest enough; life had given him precious little reason to be otherwise. All the same it might have a certain sincerity, perhaps a precision of attack, an absence of pose. It might carry a conviction that it had all happened and that most of it had hurt. Even a hardened reviewer, if he were as acute and accomplished a critic as Mr. Stall, would take from a book like that what the author had meant to have had taken. Waller had called him “a Rag-time Pundit,” but he was not remarkable for reverence towards his colleagues. Anyhow, he’d know the answers to these tentative questions in a few hours. How marvellous, how unbelievable it sounded! These people passing by him in endless, strolling nonchalance might have his name on their lips by to-morrow. “Have you read *Written in Our Flesh* by a fellow called Frone? Reginald Stall recommended it most highly. I tried to get a copy at Hatchards’ to-day but they were sold out, not a copy left.” What childish nonsense, and yet how irresistibly exciting! And it hadn’t happened yet! But it would. He felt a sudden insistent desire to go back to his room and take up his book, from which for the last three weeks he had deliberately

averted his eyes, as it lay gathering dust on the top shelf of his tiny bookcase, take it up and open it—as Mr. Stall must have done—and begin to read through it from the beginning and pause, as Mr. Stall must have done, at certain felicities of phrasing, evidences of insight, and those unmistakable shadings of expression, which reveal the born writer. All of which was rather absurd, as he almost knew the book by heart, but to the author a praised passage is always worth re-reading—though there could be for him no such pleasant surprises, such quiet little shocks of appreciation, as must have come to Mr. Stall and persuaded him to select the book containing them from the towering tumulus of fiction at his august disposal, for the subject of part one of his most potent and oracular disquisitions. Rather absurd, of course, but Mr. Frone felt compelled to do so. He walked hurriedly back to Number 5 Manton Street, smacked the dust from its paper jacket and settled himself to peruse *Written in Our Flesh*.

There were even fewer women in the book than there had been in its author's life, but there had been one of some significance in each, and in each case she had disappeared rather early from the proceedings.

He turned over the pages, but instead of reading the passages of which he felt fairly satisfied, he would

examine again one or two of those which were concerned with his heroine, though that was a somewhat grandiose term with which to describe the fleeting wraith whose breath had barely clouded the mirror of the first third of the book, and whose influence so thinly affected the other two-thirds.

For she had broken off her engagement with him and married someone else when he was twenty-four. Well, then, let him read again that passage where the heroine breaks off her engagement with the hero—God save the mark—aged twenty-four and married someone else.

“ Harry dear, I love you in a way and I don’t love this other man, but I’m one of those women who can and must deliberately and in a way contentedly crush their sense of decency, the better but weaker side of them, to powder, if they are compelled to choose between a failure and a success. You aren’t and never could be a success. I know it, I know it—as I mean success ! If you like I am a frigid, calculating, though, oh, so respectable, prostitute ! I am selling myself, but I know I am right to do so, for it is what my nature tells me I must do. I have stated the case to myself fairly. I have set my love for you against the clothes, the luxuries, the ease, the sense of security, the never having to think about money. I was never meant to have to think about money. If you were a

different kind of man I'd be your mistress after I was married. I'm that sort of woman, for I love you, I love you, but you are not that kind of man. Harry darling, I can't bear darned socks, darned sheets, darned cheapness any more. I may be selling myself, but think what I shall be able to buy with the price! God bless you!"

Well, what would Mr. Stall think of that? Not much probably. For it was unlikely that he would recognise it as a verbatim report. But it was. That passage occurred at the end of Chapter VI, and from then on *Written in Our Flesh* was quite lacking in feminine interest or complication.

Mr. Frone then decided to read over some other passages which were more likely to have tickled the highly critical palate of Mr. Stall. He did so, and then began to feel very sleepy. He looked at his watch—5.30. Time to rest a while before going to dinner. But before settling himself down, he took up a foolscap sheet headed, "A Day in the Life of Queen Souriya," and tore it into very small pieces and threw the scraps into the waste-paper basket. And then he lay back in his one easy-chair and closed his eyes. As he grew drowsy a curious picture began to form itself in some back area of his brain. He seemed to be watching an enormous beast, half animal, half reptile, which was stretched back as far as he could view it down a street and cramming the

pavement with its bulk. This beast was on the move and passing its length through the door of a building. And above the door was inscribed the motto, "Book Club." The beast was furnished with tentacles and fins, and, as he could see by glancing through a window, it was seizing with its tentacles books at random and pulling them down from shelves and thrusting them under its fins. And this beast seemed to be so fluid of composition that it was flowing both in and out of the door of this building, and that portion entering seemed to merge in and pass through that portion coming out, and the effect reminded him of an attempted impression of a fourth dimensional figure in a work he had read devoted to that recondite subject. This beast had one other peculiarity—it owned no head. "That," he said to himself, just before he dropped off to sleep, "is the aspect of the reading public which obsesses the Unread, but I cannot imagine why it should have come to me, for after to-day I shall no longer be included in that category."

He woke again just before seven and went out to dine. That was as a rule rather a lavish word to apply to the process of keeping body and soul together for the next ten hours at a cost not exceeding one shilling and ninepence, but it should be justified on this occasion. Before his father lost his last

penny and retired to a better world from his bedroom in a nursing home, he had been an admirable judge of good food and the right things to drink with it, and Mr. Frone had had his palate educated during his boyhood and had never quite forgotten how to read a menu, though extracting the utmost nourishment from an expenditure of two shillings (tip threepence) had not improved his taste.

He would go to the Café Royal and spend thirty shillings of the six pounds in his possession on something worth eating for once, and something worth drinking for once, to celebrate the marvellous good fortune which had come to him that day.

He chose nothing very epicurean, just bortsch, a sole, lamb cutlets, half a bottle of Meursault and a glass of good brandy. This programme was carried out, and at the end of it he felt almost gorged, and entirely exhilarated, but as the time approached for him to go to Waller's flat he began to be very, very nervous. He got there punctually at nine. Mr. Waller made him very welcome and poured him out a glass of port. Mr. Waller was very fond of Mr. Frone and till that day had been desperately sorry for him. Consequently he was feeling nervous too. But he efficiently disguised the fact and talked away about Fleet Street "shop" till the clock showed it was 9.25, and then he turned the button of his wireless set to "on." It was the tail-end of a ballad



concert, and the grimly familiar strains of a venerable inanity by Tosti slushed through the loud-speaker, then mercifully ceased, and the announcer declared that the stage was set for one of Mr. Reginald Stall's famous talks on "Books of the Day," and Mr. Frone's heart performed those funny—sometimes slightly frightening-tricks again.

Mr. Reginald Stall had ceased to think and formed himself into a company at the age of fifty-two. He had done everything in turns and nothing quite badly and nothing really well, for he was fundamentally superficial. He had once had four plays running simultaneously in London theatres, which fact had formed the text for more than one sermon on the decadence of the British Drama. He knew to a hair's breadth how much sentimentality the public would stand. Though not entirely lacking in literary taste, save where his own work was concerned, he had raised himself by kowtowing, delicately disguised as criticising, to the status of an Oracle, and was paid large sums for not being too darned highbrow, for deeply respecting the half-baked susceptibilities of the half-educated. References to the Deity dripped from his pen. Enough of him ! On this occasion he announced his intention of dealing in the short time at his disposal with what he might call the Autobiographical Novel, illustrating his thesis by certain specimens of that genre



of fiction which he had recently perused. (This piece of information was highly reassuring to Mr. Frone.) Mr. Stall then proceeded to deliver himself of some rotund introductory platitudes. The Autobiographical Novel, in his opinion, was perhaps the most poignant of all, written as it often was in the very heart's blood of its author. It was a *cri de cœur*, a cry from the heart, in many cases, something almost sacred, in the truest sense a Human Document, and it behoved the critic to deal tenderly—very tenderly—with such documents, when it was at once his duty and his pleasure to say a few words about them to such an exceptionally intelligent section of the community as that which through ear-phones and loud-speakers was doing him the honour of listening to his little talk that night. (There he paused and took a deep pull at a double Johnnie Walker and “Polly.”)

The first novel of this type to which he proposed to draw their attention this evening was, *And Then There Were Two*, by Lois Dunt, who, he understood, was a young woman. He would repeat that : “*And Then There Were Two*,” by Lois Dunt.

To Mr. Frone's stretched and aching consciousness this work seemed to be chiefly of obstetric interest, and apparently the description of the heroine's extremely protracted, painful, but eventually successful attempts to increase the population was a

magnificent piece of nervous prose, and the situation lost nothing of its poignancy from the fact that the masculine responsibility for the event might have been laid equally justly at the door of any one of a platoon of possibles. So “noteworthy” and “arresting” Mr. Stall found this “gripping” presentment of so original and “striking” a theme that it was 9.35 before he had said his last word upon it. Half-time! By now there was just the trace of tension in Mr. Waller’s sitting-room. He himself was smoking rather quickly. Mr. Frone was deliberately keeping his eyes away from him. Then Mr. Stall metaphorically picked up another volume, equally in his opinion a “human document,” though in every case he would remind listeners it was only his intuition that told him these works were autobiographical, a necessary warning he wished most emphatically to emphasise; he ought to have done so earlier in his “little talk.”

But by this time Mr. Frone could not endure to listen, but could only realise that this torrent of pontifical journalese was most sharply connected with the movements of the hands of a clock which terribly soon reached 9.40. And then Mr. Stall—his time he found “running short”—drew attention to another *cri de cœur* entitled “Badinage,” but Mr. Frone was finding it harder and harder to concentrate upon these observations. For one thing

his heart was not making it easy to do so. At one moment it seemed that he had no pulse and that he was already dying, and then "Thump," "Thud," a horrid broken rhythm the menace of which made it so very difficult to listen. For Mr. Stall's time was almost up. And—and—and then to the dimming consciousness of Mr. Frone came a vast beast with tentacles and fins, and up went those tentacles to shelves and pulled down books, and then, as though from a vast distance, he heard Mr. Stall's voice remarking, "There was another work of this type to which I had intended to introduce you to-night, but I see I have already exceeded my time." And then Mr. Frone sent a curious, twisted glance over to Mr. Waller, which Mr. Waller could not meet—a smile of sorts. And then Mr. Frone tottered to his feet, swayed for a moment, and crashed down. As he fell his head struck the wireless set and brought it with him to the floor, and this in falling jerked at the cord connecting it with the loud-speaker, which swayed a moment and then toppled over and dropped on to Mr. Frone's head, hatting him most fantastically. The effect of this must have been displeasing, for Mr. Waller, even before he attempted to succour Mr. Frone, clenched his fist and crashed the loud-speaker into a corner of the room, where it crumpled sharply.

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*BLIND MAN'S BUFF*

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## *BLIND MAN'S BUFF*

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“WELL, thank heavens that yokel seemed to know the place,” said Mr. Cort to himself. “‘First to the right, second to the left, black gates.’ I hope the oaf in Wendover who sent me six miles out of my way will freeze to death. It’s not often like this in England—cold as the penny in a dead man’s eye.” He’d barely reach the place before dusk. He let the car out over the rasping, frozen roads. “‘First to the right’”—must be this—second to the left, must be this—and there were the black gates. He got out, swung them open, and drove cautiously up a narrow, twisting drive, his headlights peering suspiciously round the bends. Those hedges wanted clipping, he thought, and this lane would have to be remetalled—full of holes. Nasty drive up on a bad night; would cost some money, though.

The car began to climb steeply and swing to the right, and presently the high hedges ended abruptly, and Mr. Cort pulled up in front of Lorn Manor. He got out of the car, rubbed his hands, stamped his feet, and looked about him.

Lorn Manor was embedded half-way up a Chiltern spur and, as the agent had observed, “commanded

extensive vistas." The place looked its age, Mr. Cort decided, or rather ages, for the double Georgian brick chimneys warred with the Queen Anne left front. He could just make out the date, 1703, at the base of the nearest chimney. All that wing must have been added later. "Big place, marvellous bargain at seven thousand, can't understand it. How those windows with their little curved eyebrows seem to frown down on one!" And then he turned and examined the "vistas." The trees were tinted exquisitely to an uncertain glory as the great red sinking sun flashed its rays on their crystal mantle. The vale of Aylesbury was drowsing beneath a slowly deepening shroud of mist. Above it the hills, their crests rounded and shaded by silver and rose coppices, seemed to have set in them great smoky eyes of flame where the last rays burned in them.

"It is like some dream world," thought Mr. Cort. "It is curious how, wherever the sun strikes, it seems to make an eye, and each one fixed on me; those hills, even those windows. But, judging from that mist, I shall have a slow journey home; I'd better have a quick look inside, though I have already taken a prejudice against the place—I hardly know why. Too lonely and isolated, perhaps." And then the eyes blinked and closed, and it was dark. He took a key from his pocket and



went up three steps and thrust it into the key-hole of the massive oak door. The next moment he looked forward into absolute blackness, and the door swung to and closed behind him. This, of course, must be the "palatial panelled hall" which the agent described. He must strike a match and find the light-switch. He fumbled in his pockets without success, and then he went through them again. He thought for a moment, "I must have left them on the seat in the car," he decided; "I'll go and fetch them. The door must be just behind me here."

He turned and groped his way back, and then drew himself up sharply, for it had seemed that something had slipped past him, and then he put out his hands—to touch the back of a chair, brocaded, he judged. He moved to the left of it and walked into a wall, changed his direction, went back past the chair, and found the wall again. He went back to the chair, sat down, and went through his pockets again, more thoroughly and carefully this time. Well, there was nothing to get fussed about; he was bound to find the door sooner or later. Now, let him think. When he came in he had gone straight forward, three yards perhaps; but he couldn't have gone straight back, because he'd stumbled into this chair. The door must be a little to the left or the right of it. He'd try each in turn.

He turned to the left first, and found himself going down a little narrow passage; he could feel its sides when he stretched out his hands. Well, then, he'd try the right. He did so, and walked into a wall. He groped his way along it, and again it seemed as if something slipped past him. "I wonder if there's a bat in here?" he asked himself, and then found himself back at the chair.

How Rachel would laugh if she could see him now. Surely he had a stray match somewhere. He took off his overcoat and ran his hands round the seam of every pocket, and then he did the same to the coat and waistcoat of his suit. And then he put them on again. Well, he'd try again. He'd follow the wall along. He did so, and found himself in a little narrow passage. Suddenly he shot out his right hand, for he had the impression that something had brushed his face very lightly. "I'm beginning to get a little bored with that bat, and with this blasted room generally," he said to himself. "I could imagine a more nervous person than myself getting a little fussed and panicky; but that's the one thing not to do." Ah, here was that chair again. "Now, I'll try the wall the other side." Well, that seemed to go on for ever, so he retraced his steps till he found the chair, and sat down again. He whistled a little snatch resignedly. What an echo! The little tune had been flung back at him so fiercely,

almost menacingly. Menacingly : that was just the feeble, panicky word a nervous person would use. Well, he'd go to the left again this time.

As he got up, a quick spurt of cold air fanned his face. "Is anyone there?" he said. He had purposely not raised his voice—there was no need to shout. Of course, no one answered. Who could there have been to answer since the caretaker was away? Now let him think it out. When he came in he must have gone straight forward and then swerved slightly on the way back; therefore—no, he was getting confused. At that moment he heard the whistle of a train, and felt reassured. The line from Wendover to Aylesbury ran half-left from the front door, so it should be about there—he pointed with his finger, got up, groped his way forward, and found himself in a little narrow passage. Well, he must turn back and go to the right this time. He did so, and something seemed to slip just past him, and then he scratched his finger slightly on the brocade of the chair. "Talk about a maze," he thought to himself; "it's nothing to this." And then he said to himself, under his breath: "Curse this vile, god-forsaken place!" A silly, panicky thing to do he realised—almost as bad as shouting aloud. Well, it was obviously no use trying to find the door, he *couldn't* find it—*couldn't*. He'd sit in the chair till the light came. He sat down.

How very silent it was ; his hands began searching in his pockets once more. Except for that sort of whispering sound over on the left somewhere—except for that, it was absolutely silent—except for that. What could it be ? The caretaker was away. He turned his head slightly and listened intently. It was almost as if there were several people whispering together. One got curious sounds in old houses. How absurd it was ! The chair couldn't be more than three or four yards from the door. There was no doubt about that. It must be slightly to one side or the other. He'd try the left once more. He got up, and something lightly brushed his face. " Is anyone there ? " he said, and this time he knew he had shouted. " Who touched me ? Who's whispering ? Where's the door ? " What a nervous fool he was to shout like that ; yet someone outside might have heard him. He went groping forward again, and touched a wall. He followed along it, touching it with his finger-tips, and there was an opening.

The door, the door, it must be ! And he found himself going down a little narrow passage. He turned and ran back. And then he remembered ! He had put a match-booklet in his note-case ! What a fool to have forgotten it, and made such an exhibition of himself. Yes, there it was ; but his hands were trembling, and the booklet slipped through his

fingers. He fell to his knees, and began searching about on the floor. "It must be just here, it can't be far"—and then something icy-cold and damp was pressed against his forehead. He flung himself forward to seize it, but there was nothing there. And then he leapt to his feet, and with tears streaming down his face, cried: "Who is there? Save me! Save me!" And then he began to run round and round, his arms outstretched. At last he stumbled against something, the chair—and something touched him as it slipped past. And then he ran screaming round the room; and suddenly his screams slashed back at him, for he was in a little narrow passage.

"Now, Mr. Runt," said the coroner, "you say you heard screaming coming from the direction of the Manor. Why didn't you go to find out what was the matter?"

"None of us chaps goes to Manor after sundown," said Mr. Runt.

"Oh, I know there's some absurd superstition about the house; but you haven't answered the question. There were screams, obviously coming from someone who wanted help. Why didn't you go to see what was the matter, instead of running away?"

"None of us chaps goes to Manor after sundown," said Mr. Runt.

“ Don't fence with the question. Let me remind you that the doctor said Mr. Cort must have had a seizure of some kind, but that had help been quickly forthcoming, his life might have been saved. Do you mean to tell me that, even if you had known this, you would still have acted in so cowardly a way? ”

Mr. Runt fixed his eyes on the ground and fingered his cap.

“ None of us chaps goes to Manor after sundown,” he repeated.

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*A COINCIDENCE AT HUNTON*

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## A COINCIDENCE AT HUNTON

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"AND how are all the placid and pleasant denizens of East Bucks?" asked Brent. "Not all quite as placid as they seem, so far as I remember."

"Extremely flourishing," replied Lumley. "We have increased the population here and there, and watched with coy excitement some mild and invariably unconsummated infidelities. It was a hot summer, and some of us felt a little experimental. But all is peace again—a little patched up here and there. But our moral standards are high and we make the way of the waverer very hard."

"Does that apply to your local lady-killer?" asked Brent.

"It applies to me, certainly."

"I said '*lady*,'" replied Brent. "I mean a fellow who somehow curiously appealed to me, whose tennis attracted me much more than his painting. One on whom even your imperturbably chaste wives found it hard to resist smiling, and upon whom all those 'Sappery' White Men, their husbands, were inclined to frown."

"I take it you mean Bob Harriday."

" Yes, that's the fellow."

" Well, he's dead."

" Dead ! How did he die? "

" He was drowned in Hunton Reservoir in November. He went through a hole in the ice."

" And I daresay some of you rather unattractive married men were not overwhelmed with grief. When I last stayed with you in June—just before I sailed—he looked like being hooked by a very plain but affluent maiden whose figure almost made one forget her face."

" You mean Brenda Vandelaar," said Lumley.

" Yes, he did get engaged to her."

" Poor devil, was she very knocked up? "

" She hadn't a chance to be, she was drowned in Hunton too."

" What ! " cried Brent. " At the same time? "

" No, in September, while bathing."

" Good Lord," said Brent. " These are curious goings-on for the sober and responsible county of Bucks. But seriously that seems rather an extraordinary coincidence."

Lumley looked out from the club window to Pall Mall, where taxis were honking and jostling through the streaming March night.

" Well," he said at length, " I suppose I shall have to tell you the story, though I swear it shall be for the last time. I'm utterly sick of it."

"Why have you been appointed the Kai-Lung of these events?" asked Brent.

"Because I was more or less in at the death, and not so far from sharing the fate of the principals. Also I knew Bob rather better than any of them, I suppose."

"Well, you've got to say your piece again, and if the tale pleases me I will drop some yen into your bowl."

"Oh, all right," said Lumley resignedly. "Now you only saw these people at a few week-ends, so I shall have to tell you more about them. About Bob and Brenda I mean.

"Now Harriday was a very curious and complex person. This was no doubt partly due to the fact that his father had been a fearless and pugnacious free-thinker and his mother a morbidly credulous Anglo-Catholic. Why they ever married was and remained a complete mystery. But this hopelessly incompatible union had appropriate issue. Bob was a painter of great promise. I'm no judge of such things, but those who are assured me of it. But what I *could* realise was that he was conversationally a genius. We are not exactly a high-brow colony in East Bucks, but we listened to Bob, though his talk was informed, highly sophisticated and obviously the fruit of a very nimble intelligence which had trained itself by deep and catholic study to the

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## A COINCIDENCE AT HUNTON

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highest degree of precision and subtlety, though curiously enough he never wrote, or tried to, I believe. Not that he ever preached or paraded his knowledge, he simply released a spring in his brain and a beautifully ordered torrent of paradox, aphorism and profound verbal ingenuity poured forth. Not often though. He was completely silent as a rule. He spent most of his time quite alone. He came out of his solitude more in the summer, for he loved tennis and played it, as you know, almost brilliantly. And then there was his Sex Appeal, as I believe it's called. Sometimes it's also called 'IT,' I gather. Well, whatever it's called Bob had it. I once asked Lillian how she felt about him. She replied, that if he hadn't been somewhat of a misogynist she would strongly advise me not to leave them alone together on a hot June night. When I asked what weird power he possessed through which he could lure into wanton imaginings the staidest of matrons, she declared she knew no more than I did. She didn't like him so particularly, but that something in his personality aroused dreams of primitive ecstasy in every woman of temperament. It wasn't only his looks and it wasn't his intelligence, it was an amalgam, and a woman could no more explain his effect on her if she were temperamental than she could explain the effect of Beethoven on her if she were musical. That those of her friends who were sensi-

tive to such influences unanimously agreed with her that he could be, if he chose, the Pied Piper of East Bucks, and so on.

“ Now you have suggested that we, the jealous husbands and fathers of Great Wissenden and district, frowned upon him. Not really, I think. We should desperately have feared the music of his pipe if he'd ever shown signs of tuning up, but he never did, and the feminine adulation he encountered did not give him swelled head, in fact it usually seemed to embarrass and bore him. He never played up to his attraction for women, one reason being possibly that he was as poor as a church mouse, and it galled him and soured him somewhat. He could just afford that tiny Top Cottage, but not to entertain or really be himself. He occasionally unburdened himself to me, and I know he felt cribbed, cabined and confined and ashamed of his poverty. And that was where Brenda Vandelaar came in with her ten thousand a year. If ever I saw a woman make up her mind to buy a man it was Brenda. Her will was as strong as her admirable body, her intentions as plain as her face. She employed the methods of modern War. Eschewing any strategical subtlety she flung her 200,000 golden mercenaries into the assault. She revealed to Harriday in a dozen ways how he might ease his lot and increase his felicity by means of her cheque-

book. Bob, like most artists who are poor, was weak, that is to say, he most bitterly failed to see why we, who bought shares and sold soap and audited account books, should have nice comfortable houses and motor-cars, and the wherewithal to travel and enjoy ourselves, while he was condemned to indecorous penury, though his brain was worth all of ours put together. So in the end he succumbed and was engaged by Brenda. This was in the first week of August. Now I watched him carefully about this time. I watched him as he received somewhat cryptic congratulations. I watched him in the company of his bride-to-be, and I knew for certain he regretted his surrender as soon as he had made it, but he was actually terrorised by her ardour and potential violence. I could see that he hoped against hope that he might suddenly find the courage to escape, and was employing the usual temporising insincerities of the cornered weakling, the trapped gentleman, and I'm sure that he was always desperately strung between two opinions. Remember, he was a highly trained judge of what was beautiful. Certainly her money would enable him to travel and see all that was lovely in the world, and all he longed to see. And then her body was æsthetically satisfying, but her face was not merely plain—what we consider plain an artist often finds challenging and stimulating—it was lifeless, badly



moulded, and, I can imagine, actually repulsive to anyone acutely sensitive to visual impressions. Anyhow there it was, and it always seemed to me that he was experiencing a sense of disgrace and degradation, that he was writhing in those triumphant coils, so that for the first time he allowed his gaze desperately to wander over the many stereotyped 'pretties' of East Bucks, 'Escape-me-never' hissing in his ears. Psychologically Brenda had the debits of her assets. A strong will, an indomitable determination, is seldom found allied with intellectual suppleness and finesse, and once she had, as it were, put her money down and obtained a binding option on the man she meant to marry, she showed it only too plainly. Her attitude became blandly and confidently proprietorial and possessive. She even had the supreme impertinence to criticise his work, with what must have been a maddening combination of confidence and philistinism. She displayed him and flaunted him before the highly exasperated locals, as if to say, 'Look here, you maidens and matrons, I have secured that for which most of you in your heart of hearts lusted. Remember this, a pretty face is subject to the law of diminishing returns, as each year traces a line and etches in a crow's-foot, whereas £200,000 properly invested increases and multiplies. I may be as plain as a petrol pump, but I've bought the most attractive man within a thirty-mile radius.

I've bought him and I'll keep him ! ' She was not exactly beloved.

" It was not long before Harriday began to feel the strain. He lost his resilience, his face became drawn, and its expression inadequately concealed the molten irritation of his mind."

" He could have broken it off, I suppose? " said Brent. " He hadn't compromised her in any way, had he? "

" Well, concerning that there were rumours. The night he got engaged he did not leave her house till five o'clock. Certainly that was merely servants' gossip, but there's no reason to doubt it. Anyhow if he'd had the guts to break it off, he'd have had the guts to prevent it happening, I imagine."

" Wasn't she the older of the two? " asked Brent

" Yes, thirty-one to his twenty-six."

" Was she in love with him? "

" Yes, in a sense. She was very passionate by nature but vigorously repressed, and she released all her pent-up emotion on Bob, though it might have been any attractive man, I think. After a bit I kept out of their way, for Bob's wretched attempts to play the lover and pretend he wasn't miserable and utterly ashamed of himself were horrible to watch and got on my nerves. The wedding was fixed for the middle of October. On September 26th I went up to London as usual, and as there was a very heavy

American mail I missed my usual train and didn't get home till 8.30. Lillian met me on the doorstep, obviously heavy with tidings. Brenda had been drowned that afternoon in Hunton Reservoir. She and Harriday had gone down there to bathe about four o'clock. Half an hour later he had dashed up to the officers' mess at the Aerodrome and told them that Brenda had suddenly thrown up her arms and disappeared, not to appear again. They were now dragging the lake.

"There seemed to be nothing I could do for the moment, and I was tired and hungry, so I waited till after dinner and then rang up the Top Cottage, and found that Bob had just got in. He said he would like to see me, so I went round. He was pacing up and down his little studio, and he had been drinking. He immediately began to pour forth a rather incoherent account of what had happened, returning over and over again to the fact that he had had no chance of saving Brenda. When she sank they had been at least a hundred yards apart. He seemed temporarily unbalanced, and I attributed this to those very frequent, if very natural, visits to the *tantalus*. At the same time I thought I detected an intense sense of relief competing with the horror, and not quite concealed. This made my conventional condolences sound ridiculous. I advised him to get away after the inquest. But there was no inquest, for in spite

of the most exhaustive scouring of the lake's bottom, the body was not recovered. Harriday did go away for a few days, and when he came back he shut himself up and refused all invitations and was said to be drinking hard."

"Was there much local gossip?" asked Brent. "I imagine that such an affair provided a welcome change from baby talk at tennis parties."

"Some of the women, shall we say 'conjectured,' rather indiscreetly," replied Lumley, "but we did our best to shut them up. It was the fact that the body was not found which lent a certain air of mystery to the business. I couldn't understand it myself. The dragging might easily fail, but why didn't it reappear of its own accord? As you can imagine, Hunton ceased to be a very popular bathing place, for there was always the chance of finding an old friend at one's side. Well, as it didn't reappear there were veiled hints and insinuations that it wasn't there at all—never had been—and Harriday's drinking and hiding away, as it were, reinforced these sinister whispers. For his own sake I made up my mind to tackle him on the subject, and I went round early one Sunday morning. He was still in bed when I arrived, so I went into his studio. It was a glorious early autumn morning, radiant yet deliciously fresh, but the atmosphere of the studio was almost nauseatingly foetid and stale though the window was

open. It smelt rank and mildewy, like rotting weeds, I remember thinking. Presently Bob came down. He was looking sluttish and ill, another 'morning after' very obviously. As delicately as I could I stated my case. I told him that everyone was anxious to help him, and hurt and perplexed at his refusal to meet us half-way. That his behaviour was causing just a little comment—and then I was suddenly completely knocked out of my stride. We were sitting at a table, and I happened to glance down at the floor, and there, just behind Harriday, were the imprints of two little feet, and it seemed to me that the rankness of the atmosphere was intensified. And then these prints seemed to dry and fade. I pulled myself together and went on with my piece, but somehow without conviction, and I suddenly took a distinct dislike to the Top Cottage. Bob was looking very uneasy and would have visited the decanter if I hadn't been there, I felt certain. However, he promised to make an effort. He was very anxious to know what I meant by 'comment.' Did I mean that people thought that he hadn't done all he could to save Brenda? As he mentioned her name he turned his head sharply and stared out into the garden for a moment.

I replied that nothing like that was being hinted because there wasn't a particle of evidence to support it, it was simply that his conduct seemed funny.

He looked at me searchingly to see if I was lying. I was, of course, and probably showed it.

“ ‘I know you’ve had a ghastly experience,’ I said, ‘but shutting yourself up and brooding on it is the worst possible method to adopt to recover from such a shock. It is all over. Brenda is at peace, you have nothing with which to reproach yourself. Take up your life again.’

“ He promised to try, and I left him. There was a mirror near the door and I could catch his reflection. He dropped his head into his hands with a gesture of utter dejection. From then on I found my mind constantly reverting to those footprints in an urgent search for a rational explanation of them. As their memory grew dim I eventually decided I had imagined them. But did I?

“ After that he did make an effort, and we all did what we could to help him, but it never looked like being successful, for he showed no sign of recovering. He was usually half-tight, and his tennis on the few occasions he played was melancholy evidence of his physical deterioration, though curiously enough he was selling his pictures—and very curious and uncomfortable pictures they were.

“ One evening late in November Lillian said to me, ‘You know that old hag, Mrs. Colley, who cleans up the Top Cottage; well, she is saying in the village there’s something funny about it.’

“ I asked her how she knew and what she meant by ‘ funny.’ It was the usual story. The hag had told Mrs. Lent’s maid, who had told our tweeny, who’d told the housemaid, who’d told Lillian. Plenty of opportunity for embroidery and expansion of the yarn, I judged.

“ As for the ‘ something funny,’ the hag declared she found marks on the stairs up to Bob’s bedroom, which looked as if they’d been made by a woman’s wet feet. (That made me sit up.)

“ ‘ Anything else?’ I asked uneasily. ‘ Yes, she thinks she’s seen Brenda’s dog in the garden several times.’

“ ‘ What, Stinko!’

“ ‘ Well, that’s what she says.’

“ Now, Harry, Brenda’s hound ‘ Stinko ’ had been an unmistakable mongrel, but a sweet and most faithful gentleman, who had pined away and died when he found that his mistress was never coming back. And that was why I felt more or less sincere when I informed my good lady that I didn’t entirely believe Mrs. Colley, knowing her remarkable capacity for absorbing Bass and Guinness in equal proportions, a beverage which probably made one dog very closely to resemble another.

“ ‘ Yes, I thought you’d say something unconvincing like that,’ said Lillian, ‘ but you must remember that Stinko used to spend much of his



time hunting rats in the barn behind her cottage, and she knew him very well indeed.'

" ' Then do you believe it ? ' I said.

" ' I don't know whether I do or not,' replied Lillian. ' I think I do believe that Mrs. Colley believes she sees Stinko, but whether she really sees him or not is a much more difficult question to answer.'

" ' It certainly is,' I said, and feeling ruffled and restless I went out for a stroll after dinner, and I found myself going towards the Top Cottage, rather unwillingly and yet from some vague but urgent compulsion. When I reached the gate I saw there was a light in the studio, but the blinds were drawn. I walked up the little path and peeped through a crack in one of the blinds. I saw that Bob had his back to me, and for a moment I was extremely puzzled as to what he was doing. Though he was standing still his whole body seemed in motion. It was as though he was rehearsing a part in front of a mirror. I remember that was the first impression which I gained. Had there been anyone else in the room I should have said he was protesting or arguing violently with that person, but there was no other one—at least no one perceptible to me. And then I could just detect that he was speaking in a steady and seemingly most urgent murmur. All this affected me unpleasantly and I turned and walked

back home. It wasn't funk exactly, just a sense of certainty that I was utterly out of place, unwanted, impotent, intruding on something that was none of my business. But when that impression began to fade I began to feel somewhat ashamed of myself, and took a day off from the office and went to the Top Cottage the next morning. I may say I preferred it now by daylight. Bob was painting when I arrived, painting a woman's foot, I noted, a whisky-and-soda by his side. He seemed very nervous and preoccupied. After a few commonplaces he looked at me searchingly and said, 'Look here, there's something I want to show you.' He went to a drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper which he handed to me. It was a beautifully drawn plan of Hunton Reservoir, and on it were letters and a key to them below. For example :

" ' A ' on the chart was shown by the key to be,  
' *Where Brenda disappeared.*'

" ' B,' ' *Where I was at the time.*'

" ' C,' ' *The Boat House.*'

" ' D,' ' *Where Stinko was sitting.*'

" And he'd drawn several portraits of Stinko in the left margin. On the right he had drawn what looked like rough sketches for his painting of the woman's foot.

" I was somewhat taken aback by this document

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## A COINCIDENCE AT HUNTON

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and said rather fatuously, ' But what does it matter where the dog was? '

" He continued to stare at me with a very curious expression on his face.

" ' Well,' he said, ' he must have been able to see what happened; that's important.'

" (' He's going mad,' I thought.) However, I felt I must make one more effort to pull him round.

" ' Look here,' I said, ' everyone knows you did all you could. What's the good of keeping the whole thing alive in your mind and letting it prey on you? Come and stay with us for a time. Why not? '

" ' And bring my companions with me? ' he replied. ' It's very good of you, but I couldn't do that.'

" ' I don't know what you mean, but go away for God's sake,' I cried, ' and never come near the place again.'

" He got up and walked over to his easel and appeared to be examining the painting upon it. ' I can draw that woman's foot rather well, can't I? ' he said. ' Of course, as you have guessed, it's done from life.'

" ' Look here,' I said, going up to him and taking him by the shoulders; ' tell me, Bob, is it quite hopeless? '

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## A COINCIDENCE AT HUNTON

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“ ‘Of course it is, my dear Jack,’ he replied, staring into my face, ‘perfectly bloody hopeless.’

“ And I felt it was so, and left him.

“ The next morning I received a package from him. It contained a note and a closed envelope. The note ran :

“ ‘MY DEAR JACK,

“ Open the enclosed when I’m dead, and then you’ll understand. You have done everything you could.

‘ BOB.’

“ A week later came the big frost. It froze night and day for a week, so that for the first time in ten years Hunton was safe for skating. It became so on Saturday afternoon, and a bunch of us arranged to go down there after dinner. The night was sparkingly clear. There was no moon, but the ice shone with a dim starlit glow. There were four car-loads of us altogether. We parked the cars by a little inlet sentinelled by bulrushes.

“ After I had got my skating boots on and was staggering down towards the lake I saw a figure—a man’s—with his back towards me. To my considerable astonishment I saw it was Harriday. ‘Hallo, Bob,’ I said.

“ He turned his head and looked at me intently

yet aloofly for a moment and then began to walk out over the ice.

“ ‘ Well, if that’s how he feels, poor devil, I won’t butt in,’ I thought to myself. I waited till the others were ready, and then we all began gingerly attempting to recover our skating balance.

“ Mine came speedily, and as I hadn’t quite liked the look of Bob I went off by myself to find him. I may say Hunton is a good two miles long. Presently the laughter and shouting of the others grew faint, and replacing them came the steady and rhythmic barking of a dog. I could find no trace of Bob and presently skated back to the others. ‘ You haven’t seen anything of Bob, I suppose? ’ I asked.

“ ‘ Bob—is he down here? ’ asked someone.

“ Nobody had seen him, and after we had played about for half an hour or so we decided we’d had enough. I was last off the ice and, just as I was scrambling up the bank, there came a sharp strangled cry from down the lake. ‘ That may be Bob,’ I cried, and I turned and raced in the direction from whence I judged the sound had come. Out of practice though I was, I got a creditable ‘ move on.’ Suddenly I had a sense of most imminent danger and something dark raced towards me. I flung myself to one side and crashed full length on the ice. I was badly shaken and dazed, but I managed to stagger to my feet, and then I saw that the black patch was a

hole in the ice about six feet square and Bob's cap was lying beside it.

"Soon the rest of the men came up. Willy Rankin was the first to arrive.

" 'Are you hurt, Jack?' he cried. 'I heard you take the hell of a toss,' and then he stopped short and stared at the hole and Bob's cap. 'My God,' he said, 'who made that?' I can still see the look of utter astonishment on his face.

" 'It is rather a puzzle,' I replied, and then for the second time in my life I did a perfectly orthodox faint, but woke up soon after to find my face full of Willy's best brandy, and presently Lillian took charge and drove me back home to iodine, arnica, bandages, sleep and a certain dream."

"What sort of dream?" asked Brent.

"The sort of dream one hopes to forget some day. The others, I learnt next morning, had roused the Aerodrome people, but there was really nothing to be done till the frost broke, which it began to do at noon. The thaw was as violent as the freeze-up and accompanied by sheets of rain, so that by Tuesday morning the men from the camp were at work with drags. I was with a couple of them in the big punt, and we had only been working about half an hour when suddenly the grapnel caught and we began to pull. And then suddenly I saw the back of Bob's head flickering in the water just below me, and that

it was forced back between his shoulders and that there was something white around his neck. And then I saw that something white was a circle formed by two small arms picked clean. As we began to tow them ashore I heard the steady persistent barking of a dog."

"My God," cried Brent. "That's the hell of a dirty yarn. Got him round the neck had she? I hate that! Well, what about the hole? Who made it? How was it explained?"

"It wasn't," replied Lumley.

"Well, what about that letter he sent you? He was dead. Did you open it?"

"Yes, I did."

"What was in it?"

"Just a chart, in every respect but one identical with the one he showed me at the cottage. It varied in just this respect.

'A,' *'Where Brenda disappeared,'* and

'B,' *'Where I was,'*

instead of being a hundred yards apart, were 'monographed,' as it were, superimposed."

"Thank you," said Brent, "buy me a *long, strong drink.*"



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*NURSE'S TALE*

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## NURSE'S TALE

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"THANKS awfully, Nurse; it's just what I wanted. But now I'm ten you've got to tell me about that kid Layton. You promised you would."

"I don't believe I ever promised."

"Yes, you did, you old fiend."

"You mustn't use such expressions, Master Gilbert, they're rude! You're too old for your age, that's what you are! And you read too many of those ghost books. That James, he gives me the creeps!"

"Oh, I love them, Nurse; especially, 'Oh, whistle and I'll come to you!'"

"That one about the bedclothes getting up and walking about, just when they'd made the bed, too? I can't see why people want to think of such things."

"Well, I'm ten and you promised."

"And I hope you'll behave like ten; it's time you did. I daresay the other Marlborough boys will take you down a peg or two, when you get there."

"I shan't funk them. And shut up, Nurse, and shoot the works!"

"Wherever did you learn that vulgar saying?"

" At the movies. Oh, go on ! "

" And give you dreams and get into trouble with your mamma. You're such a pest ! Well, I'll tell you, but don't blame me if you can't sleep. Anyway, I know I shan't have any peace till I *do* tell you. Now, sit still and don't shuffle about.

" It's about twenty-five years since I first went to Layton Hall. Lady Layton died the night I arrived, poor dear, and the funeral and the christening took place within a few days of each other. His Lordship was terribly sad. He was a fine gentleman, every inch a lord. He was very tall, and handsome and quiet, and at first he didn't seem to take to the baby—Jocelyn they named him—but then afterwards he could hardly keep his thoughts off him. At first I wondered why he seemed so watchful and anxious, but one day the head gardener told me there was a sort of mystery about the family. The story was that a long while ago—hundreds of years—they burnt a witch, at least I think she was a witch—some bad lot, anyway——"

" But, Nurse, you don't believe in witches, do you ? "

" I don't believe either way, but where I was brought up plenty did. But, as I say, they burnt one of them, and her small boy too. And it seems he was near his sixth birthday, and this witch put a curse on the family—that was the talk, anyway—

saying that no Layton's eldest son would live to be six. And they never had done after that. So the place was always going to different parts of the family. And that was why his Lordship was so anxious about Master Jocelyn. He was a beautiful baby, and very good—too good, I used to think. For he hardly ever cried, not even when he was cutting his teeth, and healthy babies ought to cry. You used to cry till I could have choked you, you young limb, but then you were never good. Now, don't pinch or I won't tell you any more. Not that he was sickly, but he seemed to be thinking his own thoughts all the while. But the first time I found something really funny about him was when he was about nine months old. At Layton there is a long drive from the road to the Hall, twisting and hilly, and about half-way up there was a dip in it—a sort of valley. It was a lovely quiet spot, cut off from everything, with fields on either side. It always used to give me the creeps a bit; I mean I wouldn't have walked along there alone after dark if I could have helped it."

"I wouldn't have minded. I bet I'd have gone!"

"Oh, you're very brave and full of swank in the morning with people about. But you weren't so brave in the cloisters at Norwich!"

"Well, something began to tap on the other side of the big door just as I reached it; and I thought

it was beginning to open. And there wasn't anyone in the Cathedral. Anyway, I was partly pretending."

"Did you put chalk on your face? That was white enough. Now, don't keep on interrupting. Well, as I said, it was just about Master Jocelyn's ninth month that I found he was queer about that bit of drive. As we got near it he'd waken and sit up in his pram and keep his eyes fixed on the field on the left side—coming down, that is. And he wouldn't lie down until we began to go up the hill on the other side, however much I tried to make him. And then the pucker left his little forehead and he'd lie back and go to sleep again. As he got older he seemed to get more and more interested in that bit of the drive, and when he learned to walk he always insisted on getting out and going into the field, and almost the first thing he ever said after he'd learned to talk was, 'Pitty tees,' when he was out on the grass."

"But I thought you said it was just a field?"

"So it was. There was a tree or two, but they was on the other side of the drive."

"Then——"

"Now, Master Gilbert, don't keep on stopping me in the middle. I'm just telling you what happened. And what happened was that Master Jocelyn always behaved as if there was trees. It used to worry me—it wasn't natural—and I tried to get him past that

dip, but he wouldn't let me, and then I tried keeping him in the garden, but he wouldn't let me do that either, but cried and made a fuss till I took him down the drive again. And it wasn't so much that he seemed happy in the field as anxious to be there. And there was he in a wood all the time and me in a field. It seemed to me I ought to mention it to his Lordship. So I did, and for a moment he looked away from me, as if he was upset and not sure what to say. And then he said, 'Have you tried to keep him away from there?' And I said I had, but that it wasn't any use. And he said, 'Well, then——' and he paused for a bit, 'Well, then, let him play there, but don't let him wander off by himself.' I was sorry I'd told him in a way, but I thought I ought to."

"What was the field like? Were there stumps of trees there? Had it been a wood?"

"No, it was just an ordinary grass field."

"Did you see any birds or animals in it?"

"No; why do you ask that?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Well, it's a fact I never saw bird or beast in that field except a dead rabbit once. The gardener picked it up and had a look at it, but he couldn't find anything wrong with it, so he said it must have died of old age, and he threw it away. Master Jocelyn was always drawing pictures of a wood, and he was



clever at it and made it look real. But he always drew the same one with a big tree in the middle. But he couldn't seem to draw the big tree properly, but always made a red and black smudge around it. And it was a funny thing how he always made straight for the place where that big tree would have been if there had been a wood, and then he'd look up. And he used to pick his way along as if he was dodging trees, and following some sort of pathway. He talked very little and always seemed to be thinking his own thoughts. He grew up into the most lovely little boy. He learnt his lessons all right, but not as if he cared so much about them, though he was very quick and sharp about some things."

"When he was in the field, could he see you?"

"What questions you ask! Well, I can't be sure; he never looked at me or said a word. He just wandered about, and I got out of the way of speaking to him, though I always kept an eye on him."

"Did it put the wind up you?"

"There you are with your vulgar talk! I always felt a bit uneasy, but I got used to it and didn't bother as a rule. But sometimes when I got drowsy and day-dreaming I'd think for a second or two I *was* in a wood and hearing a sort of rustle of leaves, and get a feeling that someone was watching me; but then I'd come to myself and know I'd been

imagining things. We lived a very quiet life, with just a break of six weeks every summer when we went to Bognor—the doctor said the air there was good for Master Jocelyn. He seemed to like the sea-side though I couldn't get him to make friends with other children. But he liked his bathe and sitting on the beach and watching the water. And he loved the boats."

"You don't see any decent liners at Bognor, only dull old tramps. Deal's the place."

"Oh, well, he wasn't so particular, nor such a Johnny-Know-all as you. But I believe he was nearly always thinking of the wood. He used to try and draw it on the sand with a shell.

"Things went on much the same till just after his fifth birthday, and then I felt more bothered about him, for I got the idea that he was seeing someone in the field."

"Why did you think that, Nurse?"

"Now, wasn't I just going to tell you, impatient? Well, mostly from the way he stared and looked about him. He seemed to be following something around—watching it. And as he didn't look up or down I took it that it was something or someone about his own size. I asked him what it was, though I never liked to put questions about the field. He didn't answer, but looked away from me. I felt it was a sort of secret of his and that I was left out of it.

" His Lordship asked me now and again how I found him, and I had to say he was a queer little chap, though as good as gold. I still love him, the sweet angel! "

" Better than me? "

" Well, you're not so bad, Master Gilbert, when you try to behave, which isn't often. Now, stop rubbing your toes together, those shoes have got to last you.

" I could see the master knew what I meant when I said, ' queer.' He looked as if there was nothing to be done. He used to spend an hour or two a day with Master Jocelyn, but I don't believe they was quite easy together. The little boy was fond of him and liked sitting on his knee or lying back against his shoulder, but it was always the same story, he thought his own thoughts, and neither his father nor me came into them much of the time. And I think his Lordship knew that and felt badly about it; and I used to get the idea that he'd given up hope, though he'd hardly confess it to himself. Layton seemed to make him worried and he used to spend a lot of time in London. He looked ill and tired and restless. But when Master Jocelyn's sixth birthday came near he stayed in the house, and, of course, I knew why. I kept the little boy near me night and day—it made me dream and sleep badly, for I had a feeling that the trouble was coming."

“ What sort of trouble? ”

“ Well, haven't I told you about the curse and what always happened? ”

“ Yes, but——”

“ Now, then, you're interrupting again. I just felt that I'd got to see that Master Jocelyn had someone on his side and fighting for him and that it wouldn't be my fault if the curse worked again. As the birthday drew near, his Lordship was like a cat on hot bricks, and I could have screamed sometimes, my nerves were so on edge. His birthday was on March 21st. During the week before we'd been in the field every day and I'd watched him like a knife. March 20th was a very wild and windy day and Master Jocelyn seemed restless and broody, but all the same, when we went out in the afternoon I felt the worst was over, for what could happen between then and midnight? It was very dark for that time of year. Now, I don't know how to explain it, but as soon as we'd gone into the field everything seemed strange, as if it *was* a wood, and I thought I heard the trees fighting with the wind, and for a bit I forgot Master Jocelyn, and I think I sat down and felt silly—as if I was someone else. And then suddenly I heard a shout and came to myself, and I couldn't see Master Jocelyn. So I started to run, and I remember twisting and dodging as if I was running through a wood, and I turned a corner, and there was

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## NURSE'S TALE

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Master Jocelyn lying on his face, just about where that big tree would have been. When I reached him it was just a field again and he stretched out on the grass. He was in a faint. I ran with him in my arms back to the house. As I got near, his Lordship came dashing out to meet me, and he took him from me without a word. I was so out of breath that I had to lie down on the lawn, and I thought my heart would burst. As soon as I could manage it, I got to the house. His Lordship was giving Master Jocelyn brandy in his study and the footman was rushing off on his bicycle for the doctor. And then his Lordship carried Master Jocelyn up to my bedroom, where he slept. He was dead white and his eyes was shut, but he couldn't keep still. He kept twisting and throwing out his arms, and then he began to mutter—on and on and on—and presently he'd scream. When the doctor came he asked me what had happened, and I told him, but he never looked at the master. And then he pulled up Master Jocelyn's sleeves, and I could see his little arms was burnt past the elbow. And the doctor said nothing, but got me to fetch bandages and vaseline, and we did all we could for the little boy. But nothing we did was any good. He kept twisting and shifting and throwing out his arms and always gave that scream. The doctor said he wasn't really in pain, for he was quite unconscious. Just before twelve

o'clock he cried out, 'Mummie!' very loud three times—and died.

"I can still remember how the wind was roaring, and how when he cried out the wind seemed to catch his cry and carry it far, far away.

"They buried him three days later. The master kept himself shut up in his room all the time. The family had a vault in Layton Church, and the coffin was taken to it in a farm cart. The wind had gone by then and it was a queer, dark, close afternoon, not a bit like any March day I've ever seen. I remember I walked behind the cart with the master, though otherwise I've always been a bit hazy about that day. We had to go down the drive, for the church was just off the main road. Well, just as we reached the middle of that field something seemed to flash down from the sky and there was a great flame before my eyes. And I seemed to see Master Jocelyn jump down from the cart and start to run along the path through the wood. And I went after him. And it *was* a wood this time, and very dark. But ahead I could see a big red glare and, as I got near, flames above it. And they came from the same spot by the big tree. And all the time I could see Master Jocelyn running ahead of me. And then I turned a corner, and there was a great pile of flaming wood and I could hear it roaring. And I seemed to be running through a big crowd of

people who made way for me. And Master Jocelyn ran straight into the fire and disappeared. Then, just as I reached the blaze I heard him scream and I saw his little arms flung above the flames. And I tried to reach up to him, but the flames came out at me—and the next thing I knew was waking up at the Klerkley Cottage Hospital and finding my arms all bandaged up and most of the hair burnt off my head. I didn't understand what had happened for a day or two because they wouldn't let me talk. But when I was better they told me I'd been struck by lightning and knocked down silly for three days, and that was really how I got the burns."

"But what happened to Lord Layton if he was walking beside you?"

"Now, don't you worry about that, because I'm not going to tell you. And I suppose you'll have dreams and I'll get the blame. But you pester so and you're always reading those horrid ghost books."

"But tell me, Nurse, why——"

"I shan't tell you another word. You get on with that drawing of the house while I wake Miss Dolly and take her some Bengers. And don't kick your toes together. Those shoes have got to last."



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*THE DUNE*

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## THE DUNE

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MR. PARSLEY was in no sense of the word a gentleman. Certainly not by birth, for his father had been a Turf Accountant in a small cop-conscious way of business, though his mother had been superior intellectually, though inferior morally, to her station in life. She had possessed looks, a temperament, too much "sauce"—in the opinion of her neighbours—a red head and a tendency to sour and pregnant utterance. Born under a different dispensation, she might have played a dominating part in affairs, delicately adjusted her existence to the demands of a posse of exigent lovers—been all women to all men who attracted her socially or emotionally. But all she actually did was to hand down to her only son a hard head, a purely pragmatic philosophy and an indomitable self-reliance. She lived and died fighting.

Mr. Parsley was no gentleman by education, for he had sneered his precocious way through a Board School. Sartorially, he was beneath contempt, for he could often be seen strolling on Wimbledon Common arrayed in a bowler hat, a frock coat and brown boots. He wasn't even a Nature's Gentleman,

for he drove notoriously hard bargains, spoke disrespectfully of religious bodies, voted Labour, and had attached to his golf-bag a tripodic excrescence which enabled that bag to stand up by itself, so enabling him to dispense with a caddy. He voted Labour for the characteristically realistic reason that he considered the workers should be protected in their unequal combat with employers like himself, an opinion those employees enthusiastically endorsed.

He developed a sound flair for money-making, and after several tentative and insufficiently remunerative essays, he was persuaded by a brilliant young chemist to manufacture and market a most sweet-smelling and emollient substance for removing Superfluous Hair. This far-sighted youth had been one of the first to realise that there *was* such a thing as Superfluous Hair; that hair *could* be superfluous; that such hair obstinately refused to regard itself as superfluous (if there—why not everywhere?), and that it had to be ruthlessly extirpated, in the opinion of females who found the bounty of Nature embarrassing.

From the painless and decorous destruction of millions of bushels of this hirsute paradox, Mr. Parsley arrived at great affluence and a model factory.

He was a very contented, very common and very

competent little fellow ; as hard as a brick, as nippy as the devil, who believed implicitly in Number One, and in precious little else.

He employed a number of girls in his factory, but that was as far as he had ever gone to living a bisexual life. Girls were cheap, if inclined to giggle and look up at him with a certain non-factorial freedom when he made his periodic tours of inspection of his highly efficient and compact domain. They were allowed two free tubes of the emollient per month—a piece of payment in kind which they seemed to appreciate highly. Otherwise, women were to Mr. Parsley merely pay-envelope recipients, who occasionally so far forgot the claims of commerce as to get married.

This rather elaborate and expository analysis of Mr. Parsley's origins and state of life is necessary to explain why his curious experience at Porthlech made such a profound impression upon him. Porthlech is in North Wales, and he had gone there for his summer holiday because he took his holiday, as he did most other things, alone, and he had heard it had a very good golf links, and that it was easy to pick up matches there. It didn't turn out to be quite so easy, for when his potential opponents saw the tripod attachment and discovered his handicap was eighteen, they were inclined to remember important engagements and slink away, but those who

accepted his challenge had invariably to pay up at the end of the round, for Mr. Parsley was without exception the best eighteen handicap golfer in the world. He worked as hard to win his five bob as he did to make his fifteen thousand a year, and it gave him just as much pleasure to acquire.

There was another reason for his choice of a Welsh resort. He had been told that when you were in Wales you didn't do as the Welsh did, but you were done as the Welsh decided to do you. Being pretty good at that sort of thing himself, he accepted the implied challenge. So far, in a fortnight, he had only lost one round to the locals, and that was when he discovered an Australian shilling amongst his small change and failed on five different occasions to pass it on to the village tradesmen. He often took it out of his pocket and examined it closely. It had a mild fascination for him, for he was fully determined to get rid of it somehow before he left the Principality. This became a slight obsession which each rebuff intensified. How should he inveigle someone into giving him twelve British pennies' worth of some article of commerce for it? "The dam' Tories," he thought, "always spouting Imperialism. Why don't they make Aussie bobs legal tender?" Yet, on the afternoon of his last day in Porthlech it was still in his possession. His hands were sore and he decided to take a walk instead of playing a second

round. Porthlech is famous for its great rampart of dunes between the links and the sea, and he decided to explore them. He found it a very tiring promenade, and about five o'clock sat down to rest on one of the highest summits of the range. He took off his hat, mopped his brow, and stared out over the sea. The weather was breaking, a dark army of clouds was mobilising to the south-west, the wind was freshening and the sea rising. There was a feeling of menace in the air. He leaned back and dozed off. Presently he was roused by something flicking past his left leg. He opened his eyes, glanced round and saw that his hat, caught by the rising wind, had been blown into a patch of bent grass just behind him. As he twisted round to secure it, his eye was caught by something which had not been present when he dozed off. It was a figure, a man, seated on the twin peak to his, fifty yards away to the left across a deep sand valley. This person had his elbows on his knees and his head was buried in his hands. He was quite motionless.

Mr. Parsley was vaguely irritated by this intrusion and a little suspicious. Why had this individual selected to plant himself on that adjacent knoll when he had the whole long and utterly deserted range of dunes to choose from? It seemed calculated and deliberate. All the same, this intruder seemed completely uninterested in him, though that might



be a ruse. Mr. Parsley yawned, put his squash hat beneath his chin, lay back and—well, he never quite decided what he did do then. He might have dozed and dreamed, but there *were* other possibilities. In any case, this is what he remembered to have experienced.

His idea of the sea—which he had never crossed—had been derived from the advertisements of shipping companies. To him it was an element blue and bland across which a golden pathway ran up to the horizon, and, he supposed, down the other side. And along this gleaming ribbon great ships strolled with leisurely decision. From their funnels dark feathers undulated away down the breeze, slowly diminishing till they were lost in the distance. A churned and milky stir rose from their propellers and flecked the gold with foam. And at the end of the pathway were many exotic and strange harbours where dark boys dived down at the ship's side—down and down, the outline of their bronze bodies becoming oily, shimmering and shattered. And presently they shot up again to the surface, breathed deeply, showed white teeth in a smiling black face, and held up the coin they had stripped from the sand, an Australian shilling quite possibly, if Mr. Parsley had been on the deck. The Seven Seas had seemed to him merely supports for huge, expensive steamers, puffing away to hardly realisable strange-

ness; bulky, and in no way menacing or formidable fluid highways. A concept as romantic as it was inaccurate, but a considerable tribute to the efficiency of steamship advertisements.

But during his dream, reverie or whatever it was, the water over which he seemed to be gazing suggested very different ideas. It suggested animosity; it seemed frigidly hostile, yet in a way tempting; something which inevitably carried one away and swallowed one up, however fiercely one strove against it. Something which clutched and killed—and yet invited. For what a quick and merciful sleep it granted to those who entrusted themselves to its austere touch! Why not accept that invitation? Why not run down, plunge in, forget, and leave his shell to dawdle up and down its tides? “What the devil is the matter with me?” wondered Mr. Parsley. “It is as if someone was saying all this for me, and yet these thoughts seem to be mine, though I know they cannot be. I’ll stop it. I’ll think about something else, the usual things I think about.” He grasped for the Australian shilling, vaguely feeling he wanted a material ally in this struggle for his personality. But there was no money in his pocket. Was the stranger still there? No, he wasn’t, but then neither was the high dune on which he had been sitting! And then he looked to the *right* and there was a figure lying outstretched on a little summit.

He felt dazed and dizzy, as though something passed sharply across his brain, taking with it *his* thoughts and dragging others in.

Supposing he did respond to that sea-beckoning, accept its aid in escaping from intolerable pain. She *had* meant it. She *did* almost hate him. (All this part of Mr. Parsley's reverie was dominated by the mental picture of a woman, a stranger to him and yet someone he knew terribly well.) He could remember just how she looked when she said, "You bore me, do you hear? You always have and always will bore me. I can't say fairer than that!" How that look she'd given him had seemed to break him. He hadn't any money; that was it. (Mr. Parsley momentarily rallied to repudiate this libel. He *had* money, he had £200,000 and an Australian shilling. But which he? Who was he?) She was, he knew, an utterly soulless, mercenary little harpy. It was partly the humiliation of loving so desperately someone so despicable which tortured him. If she were a woman of intelligence and character he could have borne it far better. "I can assure you I'm not worthy of a good man's love." She'd meant that to be funny, but it was God's truth. He wasn't good and didn't want to be, but he was a cut above that lovely, indecent obsession. What was it? What was this despicable craving for a tow-headed, scarlet-lipped, contemptible, shallow little pickpocket?

An animal without a single animal virtue and every animal vice. And yet—he'd sacrifice anything, anyone, to see her for five minutes. Supposing he found a telegram when he got back to the hotel saying, "I'll see you to-morrow"? He'd drive back through the night insanely happy. But he never would get such a message. Never, never, never again! Now couldn't he *realise* what she was and save himself! She was a pink-and-white envelope over a system of bones and muscles and fat; a collection of functions brutally mechanical. Whether such a functioning hide ever housed a soul was disputable; to suggest that hers did was a dirty joke. And her brain was such that it merely intensified the essential beastliness of her body. That was what she was, and it meant absolutely nothing to him. Just futile verbiage. Perhaps he was so rotten himself that it was her very vile-ness he adored. For let him face the fact—he couldn't live without her. And he would probably never see her again. He *couldn't* go back to the hotel and fling himself down on his bed and go all over that hopeless ground again. Over and over and over again. "You ought to eat more, sir; won't you have an egg with your tea?" . . .

Suddenly Mr. Parsley was himself again. He rubbed his eyes and looked about him. "Hullo, that chap was running down the sand. What for?"

Without quite knowing why, Mr. Parsley started to run down after him. Good God ! He'd gone into the sea with all his clothes on ! When Mr. Parsley reached the water's edge he hesitated, for he couldn't swim and he was wearing a new pair of grey flannel trousers. Also, it was rough. And then he saw a pair of arms flung up for a moment above the surge, so he began to wade gingerly in. It was bitterly cold, and a wave bursting against his navel soused him from head to foot. So he staggered back to dry land. " That chap must be drowned by now, and getting wet like that is bad for a man of my age," he thought, " I'd better run for help, run fast to keep my circulation going." He trotted back, setting his course by the peak on which he had been sitting.

On the way he retrieved his hat and the Australian shilling, which he found lying beside it. " Good Lord ! Running through this deep sand takes it out of me. Got my heart to think about. No one could say I ought to have done more, could they ? " After all, he couldn't swim ; he was most convincingly and heroically soaked, and he could say he'd gone right in and been nearly drowned. Thank God ! there were the golf links and level ground. The links were deserted, and he met no one till he encountered a group of local larrikins at the bottom of the steep hill which ran past the castle to the hotel. He shouted to them as he ran by : " There's a man in the sea.

Go for help. He went in straight past the twelfth green." They stared at him and then burst out laughing. "They don't understand English," he thought; "but what stupid oafs they are. I'd like to have the sacking of them."

When he reached the hotel he found the landlord weeding his flower-beds. "Mr. Gribble," he panted, "a chap ran down into the sea. I went in after him and nearly got drowned."

"Is that so, sir?" said the landlord, startled, and then his expression swiftly changed. "I'd forgotten the date," he muttered to himself. "It's all right, sir," he said, "you go right up and have a hot bath. I'll send a hot whisky up to your room."

Mr. Parsley stared at him in amazement. "But——" he began again.

The landlord interrupted him. "It's all right, sir, you take my word for it. I'll tell you about it when you've changed."

Mr. Parsley began to shiver, and in a hopelessly confused state of mind allowed himself to be ushered upstairs. Three-quarters of an hour later he was sipping shudderingly that vilest of all concoctions composed of whisky, hot water, lemon and sugar, when the landlord came up to his room.

"The fact is, sir," said his host, "a chap *was* drowned there, but that was ten years ago, before I came here. A young fellow staying here went into

the sea. As a matter of fact, there is no proof that he did—he just disappeared, and his body was never recovered. But a couple of years after a visitor saw much the same thing as I take it you saw, which seemed to show that he had drowned himself.”

“ Why? ” asked Mr. Parsley.

“ Well, sir, it certainly is a funny sort of evidence. A caddie saw the same thing a year or two after, and he got a wetting too. And that’s just all about it. It seems to happen only if there’s just one person about, for a crowd of fellows used to go down on the right day—to-day that is—sir, and stand on the beach, but they never saw anything.”

“ You mean I saw a ghost? ” asked Mr. Parsley.

“ I suppose that’s about it.”

“ But I don’t believe in them ! ”

“ Well, sir, if you still believe you saw a real person, go back there and look at the place, where you think you saw him sitting. If you sit on sand you leave marks, you make a hole or two and muck the sand about. See if there’s anything like that on the top of that dune.”

“ I certainly shan’t do that,” said Mr. Parsley; I’ve no wish to see the place again. Tell me; as I came through the village a group of young louts laughed at me when I said someone was in the sea. Did they understand what I was saying? ”

“ Oh, yes,” replied the landlord. “ I’m English,



like you, sir, though I like the Welsh all right. I've no complaints. But that's their idea of a joke. They wouldn't go alone to that dune on September roth in the evening for any amount of money, but it makes 'em laugh to think of you getting a wetting for nothing."

"I'd make 'em laugh if I got 'em in my works," replied Mr. Parsley, venomously.

"They're a funny lot," said the landlord; "they believe there's a lot of small men living in the mountains, sort of dwarfs, who chase you and do you in if you're alone."

"I'd give 'em dwarfs!" said Mr. Parsley. "I'd chase 'em!"

"You don't think you've caught a chill?" asked the landlord.

"No, I'm O.K. Did they find out why this chap went into the sea?"

"No, sir, not so far as I know, but it's usually money or a woman."

"Not enough money or too much woman?"

"Or a bit of both," replied the landlord.

Mr. Parsley found it difficult to get to sleep that night. He was just dropping off when all that he had experienced during that reverie on the dune seemed to loom up like a great wave and burst over his memory, and all within a few seconds he understood that agony, and all about that woman, and why

men felt like that, and he realised what death was like and why it was sometimes desired.

But the vividness of these impressions faded quickly away and he never felt them so vividly again, except very occasionally in dreams.

The next morning he went back to London, leaving the chambermaid the richer by an Australian shilling.

He returned to work the next day and made a searching inspection of the factory. All was well. The great vats, simmering and formidable, seemed to hiss forth defiance to every shade of superfluity; black, auburn, "ripe corn"; a reassuring sight for Iris Storm and her *soignée* and "well-dressed" sisters. For the first time Mr. Parsley followed up, as it were, the career, the latter end, the *raison d'être* of his "unique" eliminator, and he got a curious little vague thrill from this imaginative mental pursuit. The tow-haired, the scarlet-lipped, squeezing little tubes, and then delicately erasing with tiny towels, and then going forth to conquer and torture men! Men—he was a man! Let them try conquering him!

As he passed through the filling-room he scrutinised each neat-handed Phyllis with a less detached eye. He regarded their faces and they stealthily regarded his. Suddenly, this new, less detached eye of his was caught by a young woman in the third row by

the door. *She* was tow-haired and scarlet-lipped, and when her eye met his she looked back at him. And in that look was surmise, expectation and, as he vaguely felt, danger. He went back to his office and told the forewoman to send the young woman to him. Presently she came in and gave him that look again. And, suddenly, a wave seemed to strike his navel and drench him from head to foot. . . . He took out his note-case and presented her with two months' wages—and the sack.



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*UNREHEARSED*

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## UNREHEARSED

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MR. RICHARD CANTELOPE is one of those happily situated persons who make glad the heart of golf club secretaries, for he is nearly always available for mid-week team matches, and he is just good enough to bring up the rear of hot sides creditably, and not too formidable for a gambol with the "rabbits." Furthermore, he is of a sociable habit, commanding a wide repertoire of seemly anecdote and packed brightly with entertaining reminiscences of the many persons of note and notoriety with whose friendship he has been honoured. In a word, he can keep the ball rolling admirably both on and off the course and is a most desired acquisition. He is fifty-three years of age, just not retired from a fine old business, a bachelor, and a connoisseur of good food, good wine and good mezzotints. His character is firm but kindly, his outlook on life mildly disillusioned, his health excellent.

On a beautiful morning in June 1927 he was driving himself down to Moor Park to represent that club against the Stage Golfing Society, and musing on an effervescence from a young poet, not remarkable for self-effacement. This fellow had delivered himself



of the opinion that actors nowadays were so busy trying to be gentlemen and golfers that they had no time to learn their job. But for the life of him Mr. Cantelope failed to fathom why this criticism did not equally apply to any member of any profession—even to poets. If it were possible to be a well-mannered poet and a good putter, why was it impossible to be a well-mannered mummer and a master of the mashie? A hasty and fatuous utterance this of Mr. S——, Mr. Cantelope decided.

During the ensuing three hours he was strongly entrenched in this opinion through being heavily defeated by a most delightful gentleman and admirable actor whom we will call Mr. Stanley Willoughby. In spite of being outdriven and outputted by him, Mr. Cantelope enjoyed his round thoroughly, for his opponent showed himself to possess a nimble wit, a sunny disposition and a pleasantly cynical outlook on that particular scene of the human tragedy or farce in which it had been his fate to appear. The attraction seemed to be mutual, for Mr. Willoughby appeared delighted to accept Mr. Cantelope's invitation to dine with him that evening at his club. So, after being chiefly instrumental in gaining a point for his side in the foursomes, Mr. Cantelope drove the actor back to London and they met again later on at the Bachelors' Club. For a time Mr. Willoughby greatly entertained his host with his memories (and

there is something peculiarly entrancing in being taken behind the scenes unless one is professionally compelled to spend much time there). Mr. Willoughby's gently caustic revelations of the foibles and frailties of his famous colleagues were delightfully instructive to his host, and then, some vague reference to the occult having been made, Mr. Cantelope observed that he was somewhat attracted by such phenomena. "I've never seen a ghost or even thought I'd seen a ghost," said Willoughby, "though I was once mixed up in something which seemed to require more explanation than it got, but I'm insufficiently mediæval to imagine that what appears inexplicable is necessarily supernatural. However, it may interest you to hear about it, but," he added, laughing, "you must promise not to say you heard it from me."

"Of course you must tell it me," replied Mr. Cantelope, "but may I ask why you feel it necessary to extract such a vow?"

"For what you will consider a ludicrous reason; because members of my profession are the most superstition-ridden creatures in the world. I despise them for it and yet I share their miserable weakness; and were it not for the fact that, as a result of inheriting a modest competency, I have just retired, I should never have even considered referring to the affair."

"I'm sorry to hear we shall see you no more," replied Mr. Cantelope. "Believe me when I say that it means a considerable loss to the stage."

"Thanks very much, but I fancy it will survive. As a matter of fact I am becoming slightly antique for the parts in which I have been usually cast. I can see grey wigs before me, and I find it more and more of a strain to learn my lines. The machine-made and machine-gun dialogue of to-day is far harder to learn than the more leisurely and legato brand to which I have been accustomed. Anyway, I was referring to our professional superstitiousness. It is all-pervasive and the taboos are typically irrational—whistling in dressing-rooms, quoting *Macbeth*, repeating the last or 'tag' line of a play before the first night. No one knows where the interdict will fall next, and it was probably mere caprice that it became an unwritten law that no one who was in the cast of *The Eleventh Hour* should ever refer to it again lest some dire doom should be inflicted on the transgressor."

"Absit omen," said Mr. Cantelope with a smile.

"You mean I may repent my indiscretion in telling this tale to you. No, I take it that the curse only falls on the guilty party in his professional capacity. Well, I have made my last bow and am consequently immune. Anyway, I will risk it.

Do you remember an actor-manager named Duncan Littlemore? "

" Very vaguely I do," replied Mr. Cantelope, " but he's little more than—oh, acquit me of the vilest pun—it was absolutely unintentional—he is just a name to me. As I recall him he produced and acted in pieces which did not greatly appeal to me."

" And that is all you remember about him? "

" Yes, I believe that is all."

" Very well then, I shall have to describe him to you briefly. Well, he was a highly competent actor, though his methods were florid, stagy and over-emphatic, but he possessed an absolute sense of what his public expected from him. He was extremely good-looking, again in a curled rather vulgar way, and his dressing-room was usually thronged by persons of position, particularly ladies; and there is not the slightest doubt that many a well-known dame entrusted her reputation to his discretion, with justification, for as a snob and a sensualist he greatly appreciated these decorative surrenders, and was sensible enough to know that if he wanted to add to their number he must keep a tight rein on his scurrilous tongue, for he was a vile fellow, vain to a degree, uncultured, the epitome of selfishness, crooked and corrupt. I know of no other profession in which such a loathsome animal could have secured a large and effusive following. There were many

tales related of his bumptious insolence. For example, when *A Flight of Birds* was first produced, Eleanor Dundas and Jimmy Block played the leads, and Eleanor as the better-known artist of the two had the Star's dressing-room. When Jimmy surrendered the part Littlemore succeeded him; and without saying a word to Eleanor he rushed down to the theatre and had all her gear shifted to another room, installing himself in hers. That was typical of his caddish little soul. Once he became a manager he never picked a play in which there was a decent part for anyone else; he got rid of anyone who seemed to be making a competitive hit, and no one was ever allowed on the stage when he was taking a 'call.' He was a bully and a 'sweater,' but as his plays usually ran for months, he got the casts he wanted and his own way in everything. And then one day Arthur Wells sent him in a play."

"A drink?" asked Mr. Cantelope.

"No, thanks. Lately I have had some of those symptoms of that Change of Life known as 'blood pressure' in men. Arthur had had one big success with *Tweedledee*, but he could never 'click' again, and he was in very low water when he submitted, *What Does it Matter?* to Littlemore. He was a huge Irishman, violent-tempered, but generous and greatly loved. His disappointments found a conventional outlet in brandy. About this time, however, he had

married and reformed courageously. Littlemore kept the play for five months. But had it been lying idly on his desk? Oh no! He kept an unscrupulous hack called Richards, one of whose functions it was to pinch ideas from plays sent in to his boss and fake up a new play round those ideas. Usually, he chose pieces by obscure individuals who could do nothing but protest and, I suppose, Littlemore considered that Wells had sunk sufficiently low to make it safe to rob him. Apparently *What Does it Matter?* was a fairly good play with a very strong central situation and a really good third act. I never read it myself, but I heard that was so. Anyway, six months after returning it Littlemore announced with a mighty flourish of Press trumpets that he would shortly produce a new play by Samuel Richards. I was engaged for a tiny speaking part, the first time I had ever been paid for opening my mouth on the stage, being eighteen at the time.

“After rehearsals began, Leonard Wilkins, who was also in the cast, happened to meet Wells, and in conversation with him outlined the plot of *The Eleventh Hour*. Wells realised at once that it had been ‘lifted’ straight from his play, and, beside himself with fury, rushed round to Littlemore. Though they actually came to blows, Wells got no change from the actor, merely insolence and abuse, whereupon Wells took legal opinion, having obtained

a copy of the script of *The Eleventh Hour* from Wilkins. This opinion stated that while there were remarkable resemblances or parallels between the two plays they were very general and plagiarism would be difficult to establish. If Wells cared to employ expensive counsel he would have a sporting chance, but no more. The theft—if it was such—had been most carefully and cunningly perpetrated and would require able and expert pleading to prove. This was enough for Wells, who had no resources for employing expensive counsel. So he sat down and wrote the following letter to Littlemore :

“ ‘ You are a blackguard and a thief. You have stolen my play, as you have stolen dozens of others, you *foul bloody* swine.’

“ He sent copies of this epistle to every member of the cast and a good many other people. And then he forced his way into Littlemore’s dressing-room at the Thespian and blew his brains out in front of him. He had always been a great admirer of Chinese customs.

“ This shook Littlemore somewhat, for the inquest might be unpleasant. So he sent Wells’s widow fifty pounds, which she returned. Sure enough the coroner did want some explanations, for he had been sent anonymously a copy of Wells’s letter. However, Littlemore employed a K.C., who very delicately suggested that Wells had been suffering from



delusions due to his appreciation of neat brandy. A typically mean insinuation. But as there was quite a posse of coffins in the mortuary and the jury were disturbed at being compelled to get so much close-up evidence of human fragility and anxious to be through with it, the inquiry was not pursued, and Littlemore was able to breathe freely once more, and he returned to rehearsals in the highest of spirits.

"I may say things were made more or less all right for Mrs. Wells. Our profession is generous to a fault whatever else it may be, though possibly a realistic psychologist might suggest that such generosity is to some extent a case of casting one's bread on the waters, for the many hours come when all mummers must 'rest.'

"Littlemore personally produced his own plays for the very good reason that no one with any self-respect would have done it for him; producing being to him a process by which his own part became fatter and everyone else's proportionately skimmed, so much so that I began nervously to conjecture whether I should be able to retain all my eight lines, for he listened hungrily when I was repeating them. As a producer he was a bully with a quick, foul temper and a dirty tongue, and I realised more and more each day what a matchless egoist he was, and as a timid beginner I was absolutely terrified by him, and yet he fascinated me in a way, he was so complete

and perfect a tyrant. *The Eleventh Hour* was a dud play if ever I saw one, simply and solely constructed to permit Littlemore to occupy the centre of the stage for two hours and a quarter out of two hours and a half.

"The theme of *What Does it Matter?* had been that of a man deliberately sacrificing his reputation to save his friend's. So, of course, was that of *The Eleventh Hour*; but Richards had changed the setting from London to the Wild and Woolly West, then a much more romantic region than it is to-day when all the most sex-appealing and expert Cowboys have gravitated to Hollywood or formed Rodeo troupes. Littlemore in the decorative raiment of a Plainsman nobly chose to sacrifice his existence to save that of the brother of his innamorata. Near the end of the third act his neck was encircled by a rope, a sheriff in attendance. However, the brother, overcome by the spectacle, broke down and confessed to a rather amateurish spot of horse theft at *The Eleventh Hour*, and all was well. I have to tell you these dull facts to explain what happened.

"Littlemore had another trait typical of the tenth-rate theatrical mind; he loved a ludicrous degree of realism in his 'props.' With the slightest justification he would bring in real horses, real Red Indians, real gold-fish and that sort of thing, so the gallows in the act was a most serviceable engine,

and during rehearsals many longing eyes were directed to it when Littlemore's neck was in the rope. Wilkins—the sheriff—told me it was as much as he could do to keep his feet from kicking the chair from under him.

“Considering everything rehearsals were carried through successfully, booking we heard was very good indeed, and when the first night came we all were confident that the Thespian would be full for many months and that we should not be worrying our agents for a very long time—to the actor a most blessed and soothing sensation.

“I do not think anything out of the way or untoward occurred during the earlier part of that evening. I should not have noticed it if there had been, for the prospect of having to utter for the first time on any stage eight whole lines of melodramatic prose before a first-night audience was so utterly monopolising my faculties that everything else in the world seemed but the vague antics of phantoms. Time after time those cursed eight maliciously eluded my memory, and all the experienced reassurance of Wilkins that they would be duly forthcoming at the critical moment failed to comfort me. But I do remember that for two acts Littlemore gave the performance of his life. He was word perfect and full of most convincing fire, so much so that he made that tuppence-coloured drivel almost seem like a decent

play. The audience gave him a tremendous ‘hand,’ and we petty ones were greatly cheered by the success of the Colossus, for it meant economic ease for us for many months. I did not appear in the later portions of the second act, and I went down to see the stage door-keeper about five minutes before the curtain. I wanted to leave a message with him so far as I remember. I found him in a state of indignation and irritation. ‘Blasted sauce, that’s what I call it,’ he was remarking to one of the orchestra. I asked him what was the matter. ‘Well,’ he replied, ‘about five minutes ago a chap came in without so much as a “by your leave” and shoves past me. I shouted after him, but he takes no notice, so I runs up the stairs after him and sees him go into the Guvnor’s dressing-room. I couldn’t go in after him, for the Guvnor would fire me in one act if I went into his room.’

“ ‘What was he like?’ I asked.

“ ‘A great big chap, very quick and quiet.’

“ ‘Probably only a reporter,’ I said.

“ ‘Well, what’ll the Guvnor say to me when he finds this bloke in his dressing-room?’ asked the janitor in an aggrieved and melancholy tone.

“ I had a pretty shrewd idea of the answer to that question, but I wasn’t in a position to help, and after leaving my message went back to my room just as a roar of applause announced the fall of the curtain.

“ Wilkins came in shortly after, and we were chatting casually as we changed our attire when Mr. Littlemore’s dresser burst in with consternation on his face.

“ ‘ Will you come up to the chief’s room, sir? ’ he said to Wilkins. ‘ When I went in I found him in a faint and I can’t bring him round.’

“ We both dashed off, Wilkins having picked up a flask of brandy from the dressing-table. Littlemore was lying on the floor, his face dead-white, his eyes closed. Wilkins forced some brandy down his throat and I poured cold water over his face. But for some time without result. We sent the dresser off to tell the stage-manager what had happened and to keep the curtain down. We were just beginning to despair of bringing Littlemore round and about to fetch a doctor from the audience when he opened his eyes. Their expression was blank and unseeing for a moment or two, and then a look of extreme terror came into them. We helped him to his feet, but he took absolutely no notice of us, keeping his eyes focussed on a spot behind us. Luckily he hadn’t to make a change for the last act, so we cleaned him up and gave him another strong tot of brandy. By this time we could hear demonstrations of impatience coming from the audience. And then Littlemore did a very curious thing; he crooked and extended his right arm as though linking it with another’s, and he

was staring straight in front of him, and, as though being supported and led, went down to the stage. We feared the absolute worst, but to our relief and amazement Littlemore seemed perfectly capable of carrying through. The fire had gone out of him and his acting became strangely mechanical, but he made no call on the prompter and his actions were sufficiently natural. The only time there was the slightest contretemps was when Wilkins as the sheriff was adjusting the rope round his neck, for he attempted rather feebly to resist him, but even that must have seemed all right from the front. But all through that act his eyes were staring into vacancy. For the last ten minutes I wasn't wanted on the stage and went back to my dressing-room. Eventually I could tell by the applause the curtain was down, and then by its renewal and increased volume that Littlemore was taking his call. And then all the lights in the house went suddenly out. For a moment I could hear a confused murmur from the audience, and then a curious cry, half shout, half scream—and then a moment later the lights came on again. And I heard a chorus of cries of consternation, alarm and horror. I rushed out and down the passage, to the steps leading to the stage. At the bottom of them was a scene of the utmost confusion, the members of the company and the staff being in a state of the most intense excitement, and then there was a cry



of 'Make way,' and four men carrying a body passed through the throng and came towards me. I drew back against the wall to let them pass. I have seen many dead men since in France and Flanders, but none has filled me with such horror as that thing in Cowboy kit, with its head dangling from its broken neck.

"I believe there was only one person who had even the vaguest idea of what happened between the time the lights went out and when they came on again; and that by chance was a friend of mine named Hawkins, who had always been known for his extremely keen sight. He was sitting in the front row of the stalls when the lights went out. He told me he could just catch a faint view of the stage, and it seemed to him that something or somebody seized Littlemore and drew him back by the neck, so that he seemed to lose his balance and totter on his heels. It was just then that he screamed. Then Hawkins lost sight of him. After perhaps ten seconds he heard a crash, and the lights came on just as the falling curtain was half-way down. And just before it shut out the stage from his view he saw Littlemore writhing on the ground with the scaffold lying crashed down beside him. There was some sort of confirmation of this from the assistant stage-manager who was in charge of the curtain, for he swore that just after the theatre became in darkness



he was conscious that someone went past him and out on to the stage. There was one other funny little incident. They had just carried Littlemore's body into his dressing-room when an ambulance dashed up, and the man in charge of it said they had been rung up shortly before and informed that Mr. Littlemore urgently required their services at the theatre."

"What!" said Mr. Cantelope, "could he have done that himself?"

"Not possibly," replied Willoughby, "for he had been on the stage for the last half-hour, and, of course, no one in the theatre was responsible, for why on earth should they have done such a thing."

"What was the verdict at the inquest?"

"Well, Littlemore died from a broken neck, but the doctor was unable to suggest how it had been sustained. Possibly the gallows fell on him as they collapsed, but all he would state definitely was that Littlemore's neck was broken. Verdict—Accidental Death. As I say, I believe Hawkins was the only person who could throw the slightest light on what happened, if you call that light."

"What happened to the play?" asked Mr. Cantelope.

"It had just that one performance, for there was no one to take Littlemore's place, and anyway the public seemed to have acquired a temporary distaste

for the Thespian theatre. Personally, after three months' rest I was engaged to play the part of a footman in *Featherbeds*, and had no less than twenty lines of unrecognisable Cockney. After that I never looked back."

"I imagine you've looked back on the first and only night of *The Eleventh Hour*," said Mr. Cantelope.

"No more than I could help," replied Willoughby, "for when I do I always see four men carrying something past me clad in Cowboy's kit."



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*A JOLLY SURPRISE FOR HENRI*

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## *A JOLLY SURPRISE FOR HENRI*

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WHEN, a fortnight before she became a widow, Marianna sat down at her "escritoire" (as her pronunciation of French mellowed many familiar articles were Gallicised), she presented a seductive spectacle. She owned what may be somewhat controversially termed the Ideal Female Figure, to which, after many strayings down Schoolboy and other perverted paths, lovely ladies must always, if possible, return. Just thirty-two years of age, just seventy inches high, just under ten stone, she was beautifully firm, strong, rounded, a lovely rippling rhythm of curves. She had made heroic efforts so to defeat the purposes of Providence as to make herself resemble an anæmic and dissolute Etonian, but "redoocing" had made her feel rotten and look worse, so she gave it up, and thereby gained her reward, for it was partly her appearance of plenty in an era of banting which drew all men unto her. She was a little uncertain about her legs, for they seemed rather larger than most women's, but, as she said unexpectedly, "They may be bloody, but they're at least unbowed," and indeed those powerful pillars were perfectly fit columns to support the

admirable edifice above them. Certainly Marianna represented good manners in architecture. She looked at herself intensely in the little mirror on the "escritoire." She saw reflected there a blonde of blondes, eyes unexpectedly dark, a nice little nose, a skin which always seemed slightly tanned, giving her a look of radiant well-being. She opened her mouth and examined a dentist's nightmare, a flawless set, and then she put down the glass. Though she had seen all this many times before she still enjoyed the reassuring vision. That the ensemble included no indication of any particular intelligence would not have worried her even if she had detected the omission.

She took up the receiver and demanded a number in Mayfair, and her expression became calculating and concentrated. Students of Human Behaviour would have been prepared to wager their shirts that she was about to enter into conversation with a man in whom she was much interested, and it was so.

When Oliver Painter—ten days before he became a wraith—was proceeding in an impressive automobile towards the City, his face showed no sign of any presentiment of his approaching exit. He seemed quite at his ease as he scanned his papers in a knowing manner. He was a big dominating animal, but in no way gross. The reason for his great Stock Exchange renown was revealed by the



look of mingled shrewdness and courage which usually occupied his face. It occupied it now as he absorbed the contents of those miracles of dreariness, the organs of finance, but suddenly he put them down on the seat beside him and an expression of fatuous bliss replaced it. Students of Human Behaviour would have had no hesitation in staking the rest of their attire that his mind had suddenly become occupied by "a dear little woman." Some punters!

The two personalities thus briefly described had first met eleven years before in the city of New York, whither Oliver had gone ostensibly on business and Marianna ostensibly on pleasure—but *he* meant to enjoy himself and *she* to put in some spells in the Crow's Nest.

Oliver was then forty-one, already very rich and in the mood for settling down. Marianna was the daughter of the leading dentist of Tickville, a prosperous and rapidly expanding New Hampshire burg, and in some important respects, perhaps, the dullest hole on the inhabited globe—at least so Marianna thought. Mr. Sheldrake did more poking about in affluent cavities, more gold and porcelain mining than any of his competitors, for his technique was modern, he was extremely handsome and the Life and Soul of a Party. His wife had also been a Grade A looker in her day, and Marianna's face and

form were the natural fruits of so pulchritudinous an alliance. She also was in the mood for settling down, or rather settling up. With her looks all things were possible. She found the youth of Tickville intolerable, and so she flirted with them cruelly. Because they boasted Tickville she despised them, and it amused her to torture them. Had Thamar crossed the Atlantic, lived for a number of years in Tickville and drunk nothing but iced water she could only have been distinguished from Marianna by the fact that she was a brunette.

This morbid and complex attitude towards the other sex supplied the only unexpected trait in her character.

So when she came to stay with a school friend in the metropolis she was through with her home town and out for blood. By the time she had known Oliver for half an hour she had begun seriously to consider him. Oliver equally quickly was equally *touché*. She was physically a marvel, he had never imagined such perfection. He found her slight American accent attractive and she had vitality and vivacity, though he was shrewd enough to know that her smooth and glossy brow would never be marred by lines indicating intellectual contemplation, and that her charming little head was as nearly empty as he could have wished, for this eligible *beau* realised vaguely but decisively that while a

combination of great beauty and large brains would admirably grace his bed and decorate his hearth, it would be unlikely to do either for very long, for he knew himself to be just a "nice plain business man." He decided after a fortnight's earnest consideration to pop the question.

Marianna coyly did not jump at the proposal, but she never really seriously considered refusing it. Oliver was not so very far from being the incarnation of her girlish dreams—except that he was forty-one. He was rich, he lived in London, he was English, he was not bad-looking, robust and impressive physically, apparently generous, a bit old though; yet Tickville was no place to linger longer in. Having had propositions put up to her by all the unmarried and not a few of the married males of that city, she felt confident that she was fully equipped to hold her own in arenas of far fiercer feminine competition. She was just reaching her best, a face and form such as hers should stir even London, and anyway they were being shamefully wasted in Small Town Celibacy. So they were married at St. George's three months later. For a year Marianna was chiefly occupied in getting her bearings, picking her friends with great care, and in giving the rooms in her house in Berkeley Square the appearance of lavishly furnished and decorated stage sets, though, like most American women, she

had naturally good taste in such matters. After that the arrival of Oliver Junior took up most of her time. But when the heir was howling masterfully and a strong posse of domestics had been engaged to look after him, Marianna started to set about things. Two years of matrimony had not changed her opinion of Oliver Senior very greatly. Still he was rich, English, *certainly* generous and *now* he had a house in Berkeley Square. He didn't seem quite as good-looking, but she had few regrets. He had revealed rather a thrilling new trait—he was consumed, “literally consumed,” said Marianna, by jealousy. She recognised that he had some cause for it. Nine men out of ten made love to her at sight with varying degrees of ardour. She encouraged all the more socially eligible with a rather stereotyped and highly deceptive response. She knew all the tricks of the trade, but there was no real business done. Oliver, apparently a feeble judge of female frigidity, made scenes of great sound and fury over these tightly leashed affairs. Marianna quailed inwardly, but retaliated and defended herself with spirit, and was cunning enough to put a good deal of stock-broking in Oliver's way. Whenever the pursuer's chase became too hot she pretended to surrender to her lord and master's will, but while the affair was in an early, safe and interesting condition she defied him with perfect success. Consequently it

was not a placid *ménage*, but Marianna didn't hanker after placidity if it was to be bought at such a dreadfully high price. Surely the Terror of Tickville had a right to a run in London. At the same time she had no intention of giving Oliver any real excuse for taking any unpleasant action. He might rage, but there was nothing definite of which he could accuse her. No man was worth the risk of losing an established position as "One of London's most wealthy and beautiful young hostesses" and that sort of thing. Oliver's scenes were rather a bore, but they had their reassuring side, implying as they did fanatical devotion to herself and acting as they did as allies of her conscience. However, as time went on it seemed to Marianna that he was calming down. The tornadoes became less frequent and less sustained, almost they seemed the result of habit rather than conviction.

Why did Marianna dally? She was perfectly happy, constitutionally frigid, and she knew dalliance might be dangerous. Partly from that malevolent and morbid delight in torturing men. It gave her a queer and complex thrill to see them "aching" for her. Never having experienced such an urge herself she found it most amusing to watch it in others, and men behaved in interestingly different ways when properly adjusted to the rack.

But even without this sadistic stimulus she would

have dallied, for she considered that her position demanded it. A member of the *Haute Monde*—an expression she had mastered perfectly—should, she believed, reveal some apparent moral levity. Her conversation should be knowing, dashing, occasionally brilliantly shocking. Those saucy anecdotes which commercial travellers are alleged to compose in their leisured moments, and which they certainly exchange in office hours, should form a staple conversational ingredient. Well-bred cynicism, careless opulence, a complete lack of anatomical reticence, sartorial and verbal, and a most catholic and indiscreet intimacy with all that was happening in the realm of aristocratic-cum-theatrical depravity—these, Marianna considered, were necessary constituents of the part she had to play. A “quick study,” she made progress rapidly, and when she realised the highest point within her capacity she was a creditably convincing replica of the real thing. But from an examination of the conduct of her friends she saw that something in the way of a lover or two was indicated. Lovers were evidence of admiration and they lent that spice of danger which post-war matrimony demanded. The engagement book of a lady of fashion should include regular entries in code, the planning of her days should necessitate some *sub rosa* arrangement with her friends, and she should reciprocate by assisting



in the easing of their delicate indiscretions. (So she thought.)

Most of Marianna's friends were British equivalents of herself. Wealthy and aspiring they worked along the same lines and cultivated the same idiom of conduct, but having the sense of it rather more in their blood more nearly approached the original. However, Marianna was much the richest of them and she forced the tip of her pinnacle level with theirs by the fulcrum of a mighty bank balance. One and all devoted their lives to getting to know just the right people. It was hard and sometimes terribly boring work.

Marianna was very charitable. Blue Crosses, Ivory Crosses, Green Crosses, Red and Purple Crosses were all lavishly supported by her, and she even made an attempt to institute a Lemon Cross, the aim of which would have been to provide soup kitchen facilities for the authors of historical dramas in verse, but it was decided at a meeting of the Provisional Executive Committee that such works were so intrinsically unreadable and unactable that it would be kinder negatively to direct the energies of their authors to more marketable expressions of inspiration. But it wasn't all energy wasted, for Marianna got to know her first Duchess thereby.

Along this worthy highway Marianna marched to social repute. The Really Right People regarded



her with amusement and some irony, but they rather liked her, and her hospitality was overwhelming. By observing the Really Rights with great concentration and watching her step very carefully, Marianna improved her technique and secured a coveted place in contemporary Gossip Columns.

To her selection of lovers she gave considerable thought. She eventually decided on a "Stand By and Casuals" system. The former to be ardent enough to merit the description, but sufficiently unappetising to make the rejection of his advances—beyond a certain point—no great strain on a robust conscience. But she realised that something more dashing and decorative was also required, and for Casuals she cultivated the middle ranks of diplomacy—Latin diplomacy for choice—for attachés and people of that sort were often attractive and of noble birth, and their response to exceptional charms and the very best food and drink was invariably enthusiastic. These she could exhibit, enslave and exchange for others. It was the Casuals who roused the ire of Oliver.

With the good luck of the pertinacious she carried out this monstrous programme with perfect success. She found an almost ideal Stand-By in a rubicund individual fifty-four years of age, reasonably connected with the peerage, a widower with £10,000 a year. This personage fell an immediate victim to

Marianna in the most photographed bathing suit at Deauville. He pursued her in a "never say die" spirit for five years.

Marianna made elaborate assignations with him, exhibited for his benefit all the wiles she realised were appropriate but secretly despised, and finally drove him to an even larger consumption of alcohol than his appearance suggested. He hoped against hope heroically year after year, and then one day they "parted brass rags" dramatically. It was in Marianna's pet private room at the Restaurant Verdi, when she was looking more than usually rakish and tempting. Fortified by oysters and a Porterhouse steak, he advanced once more to the charge. Repulsed as ever he mopped his brow, and then poured out a glass of Perrier water and dropped therein two little pellets which friskily dissolved.

"What's that, Snookums?" asked Marianna.

"A farewell oblation," replied Snookums. "And the only sensible draught for a man who *is* a man and has his meals privately with *you*, a bromide and soda. Farewell!"

And so they parted, and for a time Marianna had to depend on Casuals, but though they usually managed to disguise their exasperation and control their disappointment she had one experience which rather alarmed her. A dashing young Italian gave her a very testing afternoon, once again in a private

room at the Verdi. As soon as the waiter had brought in the coffee, this hot and ebullient exile came straight to the net. To Marianna's request that he should try to behave like a gentleman he paid no attention at all. To her indignant assertions that she would never have cultivated his acquaintance if she had known what sort of chap he was he returned blasting and reprehensible replies. In the indecorous and dubious struggle which followed Marianna learned that lunching dangerously has its trying moments, but that her conscience assisted by a hock bottle was equal to them. She left the restaurant with her raiment less intact than her virtue. The thwarted Latin went back to his flat, put on a black shirt and spent the evening cursing his mistress for being a brunette.

Marianna then decided to get a new Stand-By. Stand-By Number Two was of a very different type to his predecessor. He was a novelist of some repute, considerable talent and inconsiderable sales. Happily he possessed means of his own. He was forty-six, a bachelor, tall, thin, rather grizzled, kind, gentle, but for his job rather too limited in interests. Till he met Marianna he had led a life of cultured conventionality. A novel a year, a few short stories, a month at Cap Martin, some fishing in Scotland, many male acquaintances, a few faithful female friends. These last he regarded so platonically

that he could only with difficulty distinguish in his mind one from the other. He dined with them regularly, spare, terribly *au courant* spinsters, of uncertain age, arguable charms and unplumbed possibilities—unplumbed at any rate so far as he was concerned. He regarded himself modestly as an A 1 risk against any serious feminine entanglement, a man of the world, a man of honour, a man of recognised intellectual consequence—and then he met Marianna! He met her after a lecture he delivered at the American Women's Club on "The Technique of Modern Fiction." She came cooing up to him at the end of it, looking dazzling and uttering five and ten cent. appreciation, Lion-hunter's guff. A moment later he found himself accepting an invitation to luncheon next Thursday, and as he did so he felt the first faint stirring of that degrading obsession which was destined to harry him into premature senility. He was—had he known it—already a C 3 risk.

Between then and the lunch date he canvassed his acquaintances regarding his hostess. Something urgent and disingenuous in his demeanour caused them to regard him with pity and consternation—an epitaphal pity, a post-mortem consternation. One, a discarded Casual, informed him with vivacity. He told the novelist that if he liked consuming vast quantities of iced water in the hope that it would

eventually be transformed into Veuve Clicquot he ought to have been born in Cana of Galilee; if it amused him to lunch in private rooms with the Curate's Aunt masquerading as Circe, let him carry on; if it occurred to him as fun to experience all the extra expenditure entailed by furtive sin without any of its darling compensations, let him step right in; and finally, after warning him that in his opinion Oliver Junior had been produced parthenogenetically, he promised to lend him *La femme et le pantin*. So that when the fatal Thursday came, Mr. Rupert Shanklin (author of *Sextet*, *An Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, etc.) had been sufficiently warned and should have shown himself of sterner stuff. As it was he never even squared up but capitulated with shameful celerity, and never even bargained to retain his sword. His sensations were entirely new to him, and he realised to his horror that he was capable of knowing the same erotic agonies as the heroes of Best Sellers. Up to a point his reactions to close contact with Marianna were identical with those felt by all her more intelligent victims. He knew her for an ass in ten minutes, but that face, that body, that devastating vitality, the glowing animal excitement she aroused! Deplorable! When he got back to his flat, booked to lunch with her three days later at "A little place I'm crazy about," he cursed himself in his despair, for he

knew at last the overwhelming power of a gentlewoman's frame—even a damn-fool gentlewoman's, over a gentleman's—even a cultured, fastidious, middle-aged gentleman's mind and peace of mind—a discovery which had he made it earlier would have had a very beneficial effect on his sales.

So it began and so it went on for two years and a half. How its sham furtiveness shook and yet exhilarated him. How he winced at being addressed as "Snuffkins," and how he cherished the appellation. How his better self protested against his employment of the endearment "Sweetheart," and with what fiendish and gloating bliss his worser nature triumphed. Had he experienced these trials some years later he might have compared himself to one of those infatuate hounds who pursue a piece of mechanism inadequately disguised as a hare round stadiums, their cynical quarry disappearing at the moment of triumph, leaving the panting competitors sniffing dejectedly at its burrow. Marianna was his "Tin Pussy," and whenever an ironic hand "slipped him" he had to gallop on in vain pursuit. Yet he knew he would have no peaceful hour till he—till he—let him confess to it—*possessed* her. Oh, how well he knew that this was a shamelessly degrading goal for a man of culture and refinement in his forty-seventh year to set before himself; this



coarse, physical union with a being intellectually on a level with a half-awakened bird. He used to lie in bed in the morning miserably rehearsing her failings, her kittenish blather, her half-witted "Don't you think"s, her snobbery, her frigid flirtatiousness, her ! her !! her !!! But it was the apparent hopelessness of success rather than his degrading ambition which afflicted him. And with what unblushing fervour he would rush to the telephone at its first siren tinkle. Whole sides of his character hitherto entirely unsuspected revealed themselves; sides far better buried ten fathoms deep, but which had leaped leering from their graves and refused to be re-interred. He felt himself sinking for the third time.

It was having a shocking effect on his writing. He knew that because the sales of his last two books had jumped remarkably.

"Mr. Shanklin seems to have become more human, less aloofly ascetic in his outlook on humanity, most surprisingly here and there a little raffish," said the *Times Literary Supplement*.

"A little raffish !" he groaned aloud as he sneaked off to the Restaurant Verdi. On one such occasion the taximan looked round half-way down Piccadilly thinking he had heard his fare denouncing him. But it was simply that Mr. Shanklin, overwhelmed by his finer self, had exclaimed, "What have I done



to deserve this ! ” his tortured soul momentarily a prey to *cliché*.

Marianna, for her part, dimly realised that Stand-By Number Two was a cut above any of her other *Chambre Privée* Chums. She had felt that from the moment he had stood up, nervously clearing his throat and rustling a page of notes, to deliver his lecture, and though not one word of the scholarly pronouncement which followed had been intelligible to her, she was vaguely stirred by his personality and carefully regulated voice and forthwith marked him down. And she had found it sharply intriguing to tame so distinguished a literary personality. She became prouder of this conquest than of any of its predecessors, for he alone of them, she felt, realised she had a very good mind, and whenever he published a new book she left a number of copies lying about the house in unmissable places, and she alluded to it with as much coy pride as if she had written it herself.

“ I suppose you’re in it ? ” asked Mrs. Ludlow, an enigmatic widow of great physical allurements and one of her best friends.

“ *Peut-être, chérie,* ” replied Marianna slyly.

The passing of Oliver, like that of his illustrious namesake, was accompanied by a mighty tempest, in fact this formidable blow was indirectly responsible for it, because his car crashed into a fallen tree

between Walton Heath and Banstead Downs late one afternoon when he was returning from a game of golf.

Marianna registered an almost unnatural calm or phlegm when the dire tidings were broken to her, but, like a diffident dramatist whose opinion of the merits of his play soars with each curtain demanded, so was she instructed in the true pathos of her position by the shower of letters of condolence she received. And finally, when the terms of the will were conveyed to her, and she learnt she had inherited everything by that formidable document, she knelt down and thanked whatever gods were appropriate to such an occasion that she had been so privileged as to be the relict of so right-minded and financially perspicacious a Briton.

Gradually out of the mist of her tears emerged a version of Oliver most flattering to his memory. How he must have adored her! How unconditionally he had provided for her! At that reflection Marianna's eyes became less humid and narrowed a little. A widow—a lovely young widow—black suited her—with £40,000 a year; how men—those moulded, imploring, boring—when they came too close—creatures, peers, tennis champions and *tutti quanti*—she would learn some more Italian—would hound her and how she'd hound them back. Memories of Tickville came thronging—a

Moment of Moments ! Her eyes were bright and dry.

Mr. Shanklin's reactions to the tragedy were more simple and spontaneous. Fate had most fistily and unexpectedly forced him to face the question : " Did he want to marry Marianna ? " How he despised her and how he longed for her ! He made a melancholy attempt to break up that longing into its component parts, but the result was not flattering to him. It was, he decided miserably, a mingling of crude physical desire, its voltage raised by perpetual frustration, and a delayed burst of procreative instinct rather more creditable. His natural fictional gifts, his flair for the delicate analysis of character, particularly his own, convinced him that once these mingled low and less low desires were satisfied he would regard life with Marianna as a Life Sentence—temporarily at any rate. Ah, there was the rub or snag ! for might not this degrading and urgent animalism recur with fiercer force ! The image of Marianna drenched his harassed eyes. Poignant memories of her darling scent pervaded his twitching nostrils, and all he could think of was how soon would she be, as it were, out of quarantine and free to flay him once again. He must ring up and find out.

Marianna had been thinking of him quite often. His letter of sympathy had been far the most aptly

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## *A JOLLY SURPRISE FOR HENRI*

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phrased of all she had received. She had been strongly tempted to show it to her friends, but of course it was too sacred. It would have settled Mr. Shanklin's doubts if he had known that he had been the gauge by which Marianna had tested the question of remarriage. She liked him better than any man in the world, he was the only man she could imagine living intimately with, but she felt no inclination to make the experiment. No more marrying for love, she decided. She had the money, she'd get the title—nothing less than a Marchioness if possible.

When Mr. Shanklin rang up to find out how soon they could lunch together, she reminded him in a rather shocked voice that it was only three weeks since the funeral and it must be a long time before she resumed her old life even in a subdued sort ; that he must dismiss the Restaurant Verdi and that kind of thing from his mind for a very, very long time.

That same evening Marianna was sitting in the writing-room with the door open when she thought she saw someone pass into what had been Oliver's study across the passage. Putting down the Elinor Glyn novel which had been "arresting" her, she advanced to investigate, and what she saw made even her robust limbs tremble. For it was Oliver ! and he was bending over his cigar cabinet of beautifully blended woods in the act of selecting a Corona

After a moment he turned round, the costly weed between his lips, and walked towards her. He gave her the slightest, most casual glance as he passed her, then went into the hall, chose a felt hat from the stand and passed through the front door.

Marianna went to the dining-room and poured out a full tumbler of the first alcoholic beverage she could find—it was *crème de menthe*—and took a steadying gulp. “A ghost!” She didn’t believe in such things! Oliver’s ghost! A Cigar-smoking, Felt-hat wearing Ghost! Why hadn’t he taken any notice of her? Where had he gone? She couldn’t stay in the house another minute! Where should she go? A thin but insistent whisper tinkled, “Mildred.” (Mildred was Mrs. Ludlow.) She’d see if she was in. She’d ring up. Yes, she was and would be glad to see her. Oh dear, what a terrible shock it had been!

In ten minutes she was sitting beside Mildred in the sumptuous flat which everyone rather wondered how she could afford. “I’m so glad you came, dear Marianna,” she said. “I expect you’re feeling terribly lonely all by yourself in that great house. However, I don’t suppose that poor Oliver’s bed will be empty for ever.”

“Naturally I’m not thinking of such things yet,” replied Marianna. “And I know I shall never find anyone as generous, faithful and good as Oliver.”

"Of course not, dear," agreed Mildred.

It was at that moment that the most magical of all lanterns, that which projects images of the Departed on to the screen of consciousness, projected Oliver's on to Marianna's. There he was walking coolly in without his hat but puffing vigorously at the Corona—Corona—Corona. An emotion stronger than fear seized Marianna. What was he doing in Mildred's flat? That lady remarked, "How intent you look, darling; what's the matter?"

"Nothing," replied Marianna sharply. "I was just thinking of something I wanted to ask you. But first of all tell me what you've been doing lately." To the ensuing monologue she paid no attention whatever, she gave it all to Oliver. He had gone up to and sat down at the writing-desk. Whereupon he proceeded to take a spectral cheque-book from his spectral pocket and write in it with a spectral Waterman. He then got up again, went out and, as the drawing-room door was open, she could see him cross the passage and enter Mildred's bedroom. Marianna ruffled like a douched parrot, then recovered herself and pretended to listen to Mildred's account of the recent follies and frailties of her best friends, a topic which always composed the larger half of her conversation. Five minutes passed and then Oliver reappeared. He was wearing some robustly toned pyjamas and a pair of furry



bedroom slippers. He came over to where they were sitting, then stooping down kissed the back of Mildred's neck, letting the cheque flutter down to her lap. And then the unknown operator of that most magical of all lanterns switched off its beam.

Marianna got up, her eyes blazing, her fists clenched, her body quivering.

"Mildred," she said shrilly, "the question I wanted to ask you is, '*How well did you know Oliver?*'"

Mildred was the best liar in London, but she couldn't face those dreadful eyes. Her mouth opened, but a faint rustle between a gasp and sigh was all that emerged. Then her eyes dropped; at the same time the nearest approach to a blush which had visited her face since she had reached the age of puberty lightly coloured it. But it was only after Marianna had slapped it with both hands with all her might that it took on a really warm tint.

Ten minutes later Marianna took up the receiver in her boudoir, and asked for a number in Mayfair. "Is that you, Rupert? I've changed my mind. I'll lunch with you at the Verdi to-morrow at one. Book number eight. Good-night, dear."

And then she went upstairs and gave all her mourning to her maid, save for five pairs of Ebony Satin Pyjamas which certainly appeared quite as appropriate an epilogue to Wedding Tables as to



Funeral Bak'd Meats, and three gowns which certainly were more indicative of the genius of M. Paquin than of the pangs of bereavement.

Then she made a tour of the house, collecting the many photographs of Oliver and the one or two of Mildred it contained. Then she returned to her boudoir and flung them one by one into the fire. Her face was impassive, but she clenched and unclenched her left hand. When the holocaust was accomplished she stared into the flames, her upper lip twitching. Then she went to bed.

Henri, the Head Waiter of the Restaurant Verdi, had a far lower opinion of Marianna than she suspected. This was the sort of establishment where tipping was naturally lavish. Ten per cent. was considered a Doric-Semitic recompense for favours received. But the gentlemen, the divers and apparently flush gentlemen who had entertained Marianna in number eight seemed scandalously unaware of this fact. On one occasion a Spanish Grandee had contributed a five-franc note, several other apparently super-tax Latins had proffered sums varying from one and ninepence to half-a-crown. The Honourable James Renton had invariably been unworthy of his line, while even Mr. Shanklin, who looked a nice, generous novelist, stuck to the lamentable ten per cent. Henri wished heartily that Marianna would choose another rendezvous. It was, therefore, with

a gesture of no enthusiasm that he booked number eight for Mr. Shanklin the morning after these mysterious events. At a quarter-past four when the bell rang, a signal for the bill, he placed it on the table without any presentiment of sudden wealth. He noticed that Madam looked flushed and defiant and that her host seemed to have just conceived a remarkably telling plot. And then the latter slipped something within the folded reckoning and passed with Madam from the room. Henri took up the paper, and then his eyes began to bulge, for inside it was that charming token a ten-pound note (and the amount of the bill was £3 11s. 6½*d.* !).



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*THE RED HAND*

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## THE RED HAND

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THE postman's knock sounded just as the famous writer of ghost stories was drinking his coffee after dinner. There was only one letter for him, and he recognised by the writing on the envelope that it came from his literary agent. It was a handwriting he had learnt to love, for it was also to be found on the fat cheques which came in such envelopes. He opened it and found it did contain a cheque—not quite so fat as usual—and a letter. The first he put in his note-case and then turned to the letter.

“DEAR MR. RHODE,

“I enclose a cheque for your American royalties which I hope you will find satisfactory. Now I have not forgotten that you gave me strict instructions not to approach you ever again with offers for psychic stories on account of doctor's orders, but I have summoned up my courage to disobey you because of the very flattering proposal just made to me by the International people. They want a 4000-word story from you for their Christmas numbers—the *International Magazine* in America and Brett's over here, of course. They will pay you

£400 for first serial rights, and I thought this such a lavish offer that I felt it my duty to pass it on to you. I hope you will forgive me. They want copy by August 1st, if you accept.

“ Yours sincerely,

“ A. B. TRYON.”

“ Blast the fellow ! ” thought Mr. Rhode, “ tempting me like that. Certainly it’s a good price ; quite half what they pay Michael Arlen. I feel like writing a tale called ‘ Those Alarming Green Rats,’ I’m so flattered. But that isn’t quite my *métier*. What is it ? To fool the myriad, mindless mob and cause their bugle eyeballs to pop from their sockets with the dear old ‘ Lighted Turnip ’ bunk. I’ve done it exactly a hundred times ; sixty good, thirty moderate, and ten duds, and they liked the duds best ! Who said you couldn’t fool all of the people all of the time ? That was just a typical piece of greasy politician’s slobber. Once they really believed they couldn’t they’d go into the Advertising business, or some less cynical profession.”

But here he was at the age of sixty-four, still in the ghost-story business, with thirty-six years of it behind him, his tongue so very stiff from burrowing a hole in his cheek. How had it happened ? Well, no doubt heredity had something to do with it, for his father had been a Nonconformist parson and



his mother the daughter of a nerve specialist—a nasty ancestry, enough to get him dismissed with a caution for any crime tried before a realist judge. But it couldn't all be blamed on his begetters, there must have been a stout dollop of original sin looking for a congenial home when he was brought into the world. For how otherwise could it have happened that he, utterly, unregenerately sceptical, a gross "impercipient," if a more controversially tart epithet were preferred, had written a hundred extremely popular ghost stories, which had netted him £40,000? Yet he hadn't the slightest belief in this chain-clanking tripe. Not that he wrote that sort of story, and he knew many of his to be highly disturbing, intensely visualised tales, technically admirable, for he knew his business, and to do himself justice was a decent craftsman who never left a tale till he had tightened and trimmed and polished it to as near perfection as he could bring it.

Yet the deeper question remained unanswered. What fantastic kink had made him the best-known ghost story writer in the world? Certainly he knew authors of such tales were seldom over-credulous, usually were temperamentally disinclined to revue the regurgitations of mediums, weave fantasies with ectoplasm, or join Conan Doyle in a romp with under-vitaminsed pantomime fairies. Yet none of them shared his unswerving, contemptuous

disbelief in the possible existence of the spirits he called up.

Lowell, for example, who had written some decent ones, had told him that while he never expected to see anything of the kind, he would not be greatly surprised if he did so. Agnew, whose reputation was far higher than it deserved to be, had solemnly stated that in a waking dream one morning he had seen the whole universe, like a transparent globe the size of an orange, poised on his hand, and that it had seemed when he peered into it as infinite as when he stared up at the stars, and that he had felt for a moment, with a sense of ecstasy, that he was on the verge of understanding the truth of all things, on the threshold of the final secret. Well, he hadn't put it quite as crudely as that, but what piffling mysticism, what puerile egoism! No wonder he wrote such rot. The universe was as hopelessly inexplicable as the state of mind of those who thought otherwise.

Well, should he write number 101? Four hundred quid was not to be despised. He could buy those oils of Regnier with which Jenkins of the Pall Mall Gallery was always tempting him. And £2000 a year didn't go so far nowadays. All right, he'd do it. But never again, he swore it. He'd better look over his notes for those stories he'd conceived but never brought to birth.

He went to a drawer and pulled out a battered

note-book, over the leaves of which he ran his eye. Eventually he paused at a heading—"The Red Hand," and read out to himself: "Suggested title—'The Red Hand.' Central idea—employee kills head of firm who has discovered his tampering with the till. Sob relief—employee owns wife and a large family, destined for workhouse if swindle discovered. Method of crime—employee sent for by boss after office shuts. Employee, let us call him 'Tonks,' knows why he is summoned and is desperate. (The fact that he is sent for must not be known to anyone else.) He comes to boss's office and is shown evidence of swindle. Asked about it. (Employee better be old member of firm and trusted.) He loses all self-control, picks up poker and puts boss to sleep. As boss slips out of chair to floor he overturns with left hand red ink-pot, which empties contents over same head of boss. Tonks tiptoes quietly from room. Looks back once and sees a red hand sticking out from side of desk. Tonks makes successful 'get-away.' End of Part I."

"Part II. Mystery unsolved. (Work this up.) Trouble for Tonks begins few days later. He is in bus. Just handing penny to conductor, when Red Hand materialises and as it were conducts Tonks's hand to conductor. (This must be subtly phrased.) Tonks feel this must be a projection from his own hand, due to its intense preoccupation with the

crime. Image of hand has been etched on mind and therefore appears. Reassures himself. Not for long. Finds same Red Hand taking letters from him as he signs them and giving them to typist. Begins to be always at his service—helps him insert latch-key in front door at home, etc. (Bored for the moment, will finish to-morrow.)”

“Red Hand becomes ubiquitous. Almost as ubiquitous as Bolshie red hand to Duke of Northumberland. Sees its imprint wherever he goes. (Make a point of this.) Eventually, however, settles in Tonks’s home. (Perhaps make it cause nervous breakdown in Tonks, so keeping him at home.) Anyway, eventually touches forehead of one young Tonks and that young Tonks dies; kills them all one by one (so increasing Tonks’s Income Tax). Eventually touches Mrs. Tonks’s forehead and she goes west. Tonks now on verge of madness and taken to mental home. He wakes up in middle of night and finds hand stroking his forehead. Screams out a confession and Tonks’s family extinct.”

“Note :—This synopsis very rough and undeveloped. Full of difficulties and needs most careful working out. No need for elaborate characterisation. All simple types. Actual appearances of Red Hand must be neatly contrasted and most convincingly described.”

Mr. Rhode put down the document. “Rough

and undeveloped ! I should say it was ! But the idea isn't bad. I'll put my mind to it."

One had a curious sensation when reading over an old synopsis, almost as if one were stealing the idea, plagiarising from someone else. That *was* so in a sense, for he and the other fellow in a sense *were* different people. He had written it ten years ago. It was all very well for that other fellow to say there was no need for elaborate characterisation, but Tonks had got to be made a convincing murderer and the best type of family man at the same time. And he must have been a tough nut to have stuck it as long as he did. That was good, he was beginning to see him objectively.

First of all he must visualise that hand. He put his hands over his ears and stared down at the blotting-paper, and then after a moment he started back. Well, that had been a very successful attempt. It had actually seemed to be there. Red as hell-fire, and the little finger longer than the ring finger. That *was* just the bizarre detail he wanted. Rather reassuring to find he could still visualise as well as ever—if not better. So well, that the stain of the hand, the visual echo as it were, seemed still to linger on the blotting-paper.

He must make the boss an unpleasant fellow, rather a sneering bully, a grinder of wage slaves' silly faces. Everyone would cheerfully murder

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## THE RED HAND

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someone—I'd murder "Jix"—and most people would have a sneaking sympathy for Tonks, but it wouldn't do for them to have too much or his persecution would seem intolerable. That was just where it *wasn't* simple. And he'd only got 4000 words! Well, his capacity for compression had always been pretty good.

He might make Tonks rather a "Red"—Magazine readers hated "Reds" worse than murderers—there were more of 'em. Yes, then he'd break straight into the story with Tonks entering Boss's office; latter with malignant sarcasm tells Tonks he's been found out and informs him that his subversive activities directed against the innocent rentiers have long been known to him. Well, as he has so much sympathy with work-dodgers and dole-snatchers, he could join their ranks. Then Tonks picks up poker ("and so would I and so would any Tonks). Just before that I should make the Boss boast that he always gets his own back (with a bit of someone else's sticking to it), and bang his hand on the table." Then Tonks should notice for the first time that his fingers were eccentric. (Stigma of exploiter, thinks Tonks plinthly.)

Tonks should be a small, beady-eyed chap, big head, tiny body, under-nourished in youth. A measly sort of "Mr. Polly," extremely proud of his family because he believes they "take after him."



Mrs. Tonks should be competent, rather hefty, a natural mistruster of all "isms" and "asms," who, when her temper fails, reads out *Daily Mail* "leaders" on Russia to Tonks after supper. ("I mustn't get too interested in or waste words on her.") I'll keep her conventional type. Tonks's brats are only 'heard off.' But how shall they die?—A Red Hand at night—convulsions all right?" Better make it A Strange Malady—combination of croup and colic.—Well, they all fade out from the same stuff, so I've only got to slay one to slay the quiver-full. Let it be A STRANGE MALADY.

"I think a little morbid psychology can be connected with the first appearance of that hand when Tonks is opening his front door. He should always feel less remorse when he gets home; when he sees his wife and family he should feel it had been ethically expedient that one boss should have died for the little people. All the more unlovely when he finds the hand becoming a member of the family." One other point; though he tries to pretend to himself it is simply an illusion, he doesn't waste—for he knows in his heart of hearts it *would* be waste—any money on nerve specialists. He was already beginning to get the series of pictures sharply "seen" and fitted into their proper sequence. The horror that was Tonks's was coming to be his too. That meant he'd make a story of it. It wouldn't be



one of his best. It was rather a conventional idea—rather too much in the tradition. His best plots had always derived from some highly fantastic yet plausible psychic paradox, which it was the peculiar property of his mind to procreate. What a vicious tendency to alliteration lay in wait for him and always had done! Yet somehow as the rhyme often authoritatively dictated the sense, so alliteration sometimes heightened the pressure of an aphorism or any brand of dogmatic, squeezed generalisation.

Irritating though it was, this weakness usually meant he was in a mood to write. How he hated to begin, for once he began he had to finish; and the labour and irritation that was before him! He knew it! The strain was greater in his case because he was a house divided against itself, that aloof contempt for what he wrote about elbowing that infatuate delight in how he wrote it.

If only he'd once seen a ghost, or even successfully pretended to himself that he had, that rupture might be healed. He was too old for that now. Well, it was eleven o'clock and he must settle down to chronicle the dismal history of Sebastian Tonks. He took up a pen, and at once his face took on an expression of extreme concentration. Pictures were coming to him, he was seizing them and transforming them into words. The clock ticked softly, his pen scratched lightly. . . . As it struck four he laid his

pen down and read through what he had written, making slight alterations here and there, and then he leaned back in his chair and shook his hand from the wrist, for it was numb and yet aching. A smile of sardonic satisfaction replaced his look of concentration.

"Cheap at four hundred quid," he said to himself. "Just the stuff to give the mugs," and yet it had given him in spots that curious, puerile, chill flicker between his shoulder-blades. When he got that he knew he'd "clicked." He would think of little else for a week and then re-write it. He had a conscience. In his dirty little way he was an artist. But never would he write another.

Hullo, there was that infernal pain in his heart again. His own fault for disobeying that specialist, that damned angina. It took some guts to face even the possibility of such pain. Must it come? He was already beginning to sweat and lose his head a little. By God, that was a wicked twinge! Was there anything in the world so awful? He'd smoked too much, worked too long at a stretch. What a fool! God! that one seemed to rend and slash him, and how it brought with it the fear of death! He must wait for a pause and get his tabloids. He rallied himself, and putting his hands over his heart stared down once more at the blotting-pad. That Red Hand was there again! It just

showed how he'd been concentrating! It would fade away, of course. Now the pain was better. He turned his head towards the little table on which were a tantalus and a syphon and that blessed little tube, and started to get up. But the Red Hand swung round with his eyes and settled itself on the little table, the sharpest illusion he'd ever known! And then it seemed to Mr. Rhode that the fingers moved—clenched a little. He thrust his head forward and stared at it, and then the pain came lashing back. He staggered to his feet, and as he did so the hand seemed to slide forward and close over the little phial. And then Mr. Rhode flung himself forward in his agony and tried to tear away that hand, and the room went black and he pitched forward, recovered himself for a moment and then swung on his heel and toppled over to the floor. And as he fell his forehead caught the edge of the little table, and, as his head jerked back, the little phial slid from the table to the floor by his side.

And presently the clock striking the half-hour broke the silence.

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*SURPRISE ITEM*

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## *SURPRISE ITEM*

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THE Haunted House Club was founded in 1923 by a group of persons who decided it was high time that the venerable controversy concerning the genuine or concocted, the subjective or objective reality (a loose term, as they knew, but sufficiently precise) of those phenomena, loosely comprised within the elastic definition "psychic," was decided. Quite possibly, this group agreed, no categorical decision could be made. At the same time—and with all due respect to the S.P.R.—it would inevitably be of value that a swift and pertinacious inquiry should be always made into the credentials of alleged haunted places. Therefore, when such alleged manifestations were published or came to their knowledge, it was decided that some member of the group should be ordered to the scene to examine the circumstances and report upon them. Then, if the investigator so recommended, the group should make a pilgrimage to the scene, institute such further inquiries as were feasible, and subsequently debate the case at the quarterly reunion.

The following is the report of Mr. Charles Baber

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## *SURPRISE ITEM*

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into the Pevesham Wireless Case of April 14th, 1926—the sixth of the series :

In accordance with the instructions of the H.H.C., I journeyed down to Pevesham on June 15th. Pevesham is a medium-sized market town with 10,000 inhabitants. I called first on the local retailer of wireless sets and accessories. He informed me, rather diffidently and without enthusiasm, that there had been an unexplained case of “ interruption ” on April 14th. When more closely questioned, he stated that he himself had not been listening in on that evening, but he understood the trouble had only occurred over a four-mile radius from the Pevesham Town Hall. I should state that this area is served by the Daventry Station. He grudgingly owned that since the date of the “ interruption ” the demand for his stock and his services had appreciably diminished.

I then called on the editor of the local newspaper, who agreed to put a paragraph in his next issue stating that I was making this inquiry, and should be grateful for any assistance or information in furthering it. In response to this, I received a number of replies, the most important of which came from the local doctor, Mr. Stokes. Apparently, his son, aged sixteen, was in the habit of practising his shorthand by taking down the wire-



less talks, and he had an important record of what had occurred on April 14th.

I immediately went round to the doctor's house, and his son gave me a long-hand copy of what he had taken down between 9.15 and 9.40 on April 14th. Having absorbed the contents of this, I visited others who had replied to me, and found that they all agreed that something very closely resembling young Stokes's version had come through their ear-phones and loud-speakers on that occasion.

Young Stokes told me that the interruption had come in the middle of a talk on "Prospects for the Settler in Tasmania." It was broken into after about five minutes. He couldn't swear he had taken down every word of this interruption, as he was startled and perplexed, but he was convinced he had got most of it. The voice of the interrupter he judged to be that of an elderly person, "half-educated," he described it, "with the local twang." This person appeared to be in a condition of extreme agitation, though, of course, it might have been feigned. But he didn't think it was. He also said that many listeners in the neighbourhood had written strong protests to the B.B.C. about this most unpleasant and unnerving practical joke, as they supposed it to be. They had all received replies stating that the B.B.C. was quite at a loss

to account for the interruption, but that the fullest inquiries would be made.

Here is the long-hand transcription of young Stokes's notes :

“ Why is he here? They buried him deep. I'd sooner see him outright than just know he's there. He's been there since supper-time Thursday. He keeps between me and the door and I can't get past him. He stands there always, always facing me. I looked up just then and there he was. I'd sooner see him than just know he was there. I haven't had food or drink since tea-time Thursday, and that's days ago, three maybe. But there's food in the kitchen and a pitcher of water beside the tap in the scullery. Could I slip past him? Shove him aside? I might if his eyes weren't always on me. All on account of that little slut. As if I was the first—twenty-first more likely! What's he want with me? They buried him deep. I saw them lower him down and heard the dirt tap on his box. There's nothing there! I'll look up! Yes, he's there!

“ Why couldn't I slip past him? All I've got to do is to walk straight forward and past him, through him, and eat and drink in the kitchen. Easy, isn't it! I'm getting weak; I should have done it in the beginning. I'll think about the window again. It's high but I might manage it. I'll keep my head

down and put him off his guard, then run for it—that's what he did before, he's too quick for me. Didn't I drown you, you bastard? Didn't they bury you deep? Didn't they cover you up? That hot little piece! Always hanging round. She got what was coming to her. I wasn't the first, she told me that. Nor second, nor third. If he got that sort, it's his business if she gets into trouble. And then threatening me, asking me what I was going to do about it! Well, I showed him what I was going to do about it—and he swallowed some water. Water! By God, I want water! He's got to let me past. Why is he here? They buried him deep. I'll see what he does if I get up and go towards him. I've tried that too many times. I know what he does. He always goes round with my eyes. All right, stare at me, you bastard! I drowned you, didn't I? You're down deep, aren't you? I'm getting weak. Water! Water!

“I didn't mean to shout out like that, for I've got to keep a head on me and get past him. Now, I'll think out a way of doing it. Suppose I make a move quickly towards the window, then he'll come over and get between it and me. Then if I dodge back and run for it, he'll be behind me. I might have done it on Thursday likely, but I'm weak and slow now. Now, you dead devil, I'm going for the window! And don't you watch me like that.

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## SURPRISE ITEM

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Do you know what I'm planning? If I could see you plainer, I'd know. Yet you go round with my eyes. Supposing I stare one way and then make a dash the other. No, I've tried that. You're always there! I'll make it right for her if you'll let me past. You're dead! I saw the bubbles come up. I saw you buried deep. . . . Suppose I pretend not to be up to anything and then make a dash for it! Or shall I make a show of going for the window? Then he'll come across and I might slip past him and get behind him——"

Young Stokes said that after this there was a moment's pause and then a muffled crash—and directly after the Wireless Symphony Orchestra came through with the selection from *Tosca*.

Now, I did not disguise from myself that this interruption might have been a hoax perpetrated by someone with a perverted sense of humour and a powerful "sending" set. But the phrasing of this monologue did not seem to me such as a hoaxer would employ. I therefore paid another visit to the local newspaper office and went through its files from the 14th of April till the end of the month.

My attention was caught by a paragraph in the issue of April 17th which stated that a farmer named Amos Willans had been found dead in his parlour

the day before. He had been found lying on the floor and had apparently been dead for about three days. So I asked the editor if I could have a few words with the reporter who had "covered" the inquest. He is a lanky, inky, ambitious and thwarted young Scotsman, longing, of course, to get to Fleet Street, and with precious little chance of getting there. His name is Donald Paton. These "small rag" reporters have a disheartening existence, their hopes crushed and their style murdered by having to describe "cold collations," the minutiae of a stagnant local society, and the small, flat beer of a minor country town. Therefore, as Mr. Paton showed himself intelligent, and proved of good service to the Club, I should be pleased if his name could be mentioned in the report of the case we issue to the Press. This report invariably has a wide publicity and it may be the means of translating Donald Paton to that dubious paradise east of Temple Bar of which he dreams.

This is the gist of what he told me :

Old Willans—he was about sixty-four—had been a "character," and a very unpopular one. He had possessed a miserly temperament and an ungovernable temper. He had lived entirely alone, cooking for himself and only allowing a local charwoman to come in once a week to clean the place up. He had, however, sufficiently retained his vital forces to

make himself somewhat of a problem to the better-looking young women of the neighbourhood. He was said to have had a certain "way" with him which had occasionally prevented his solicitations from receiving the rebuffs they merited. He seems to have been an original, if highly unpleasant, old person, capable of arousing heightened emotions towards himself—hate, fear, curiosity and a kind of grudging passion in the unwise and wantonly inclined local females.

Paton had obviously studied him with insight and understanding, so that he made the old devil stand starkly out before me as he described him to me. It was known that some time before his death he had been seen in company with the daughter of another farmer. She was a notorious young person, extremely promiscuous in her "love" affairs. She was seen leaving old Willans's farm late one night, and, not long after, suddenly went up to London and no news has been heard of her since. Her father had been found drowned in the River Axe, two miles from his farm. Since he was given to insobriety this caused little surprise.

To sum up, the facts are so vague and any coherent explanation of them would be so empirical and ill-substantiated that I do not think the Club would be justified in visiting the area. At the same time, a discussion of these events might be of interest.

Hoping that I shall be considered to have carried out my inquiry with zeal, if not with intelligence, I beg to subscribe myself,

Your obedient Investigator,

CHARLES BABER

(Number 5).





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*A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

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## *A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

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WHEN Dr. Fender retired from an enormous practice in Wimpole Street he built himself a charming specimen of the modern small country house just south of Poole Harbour, there to watch the changing seasons and the ranging seas, to placate his thin vein of poetry which the grim but absorbing business of earning a living had consistently snubbed, and to write that monograph on Stanzioni, material for which he had been slowly collecting during the last thirty years. Grizzled, humane, cultured, with a brain trained to perfection for its job, he had never taken a fee he didn't consider he had fully earned, and he had relied not at all on a Bedside Manner. He had always been just too busy to think seriously about marrying.

Though he had rigidly retired from practice, he was always at the service of the inhabitants of Comble Churton and neighbourhood if they urgently required his aid. He entertained very little, but always had a small house-party for Christmas, which he refused to allow to break up till January 1st.

On December 31st, 1926, these six persons, besides himself and his servants, were present in Bradlaugh

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## *A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

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Lodge (the doctor had had to call his house something and he greatly admired that intrepid pioneer). First and most important his sister, Miss Angela Fender, an eccentric spinster with psychic leanings, chronic absent-mindedness and a horrible tendency to indiscreet utterance. She had been engaged twice many years before, but in each case the rather conventional young person had shrunk from her freedom of expression and thought better of it. So she had been compelled to accept her celibate destiny, and she did so with a vague resignation. She was a "Dear Old Thing" in the best sense of the phrase, devoted to her brother, who regarded her with amused affection.

Then there was a married couple, John and Mabel Kent, old friends of the doctor. Supers in this drama, they need no description. Again, there was the person who related to me some of the events in this narrative of which he was an eye-witness. I shall not give his name, for he has a loathing of publicity, with a special reference to his tailor, who might be encouraged to premature optimism by seeing my friend's name in print. Let sleeping bills lie!

Lastly, there were the doctor's niece, Mrs. Cannon, and Rex Lakeford, to whom she had just announced her engagement. After losing both her parents from influenza in 1906 when she was ten years old,

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## A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

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she had come to live with the doctor and had done so till her marriage in 1921 to Robert Cannon. She had lost him in tragic circumstances six months before, when he had been caught by the boom and swept from his yacht, the *Wavelength*, off Bembridge. Dorothea and Rex Lakeford had been the only other persons on board at the time. Cannon had been wearing oilskins and sea-boots and had never reappeared above the surface; the yacht was out of control for some time, and no attempt at rescue had been possible. Eventually they had succeeded in bringing her alongside Seaview Pier.

Both appeared shattered by the tragedy, and the doctor, who had hurried to Bembridge when he heard of the accident, refused to allow Dorothea to attend the inquest—Cannon's body had been washed ashore two days after his death. At the inquest Lakeford, who seemed near a nervous breakdown, told a rather incoherent story, containing some confusion and contradictions, but the coroner sympathetically asked him few questions.

The doctor stayed on at a hotel in Bembridge till his niece was fit to be moved to Bradlaugh Lodge. On the evening after the inquest he was sitting in the lounge after dinner, smoking a last pipe before going to bed and reading an evening paper. There was a group of rather noisy young men sitting and drinking at the other end of the room. The doctor

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## *A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

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attempted to disregard their slightly alcoholic exuberance, but presently his ear was caught by the word "squall." This, very naturally, interested the doctor, so, though pretending otherwise, he listened.

"Damn funny squall, I call it," a rather husky voice was saying; "I must have been within half a mile of 'em and I got nothing more than a decent sailing breeze. The visibility was pretty ruddy, I grant you, but that was a damn local squall."

"Oh, dry up, you blasted ass!" said another. "Think what you like but keep your fool mouth shut!"

"I was not suggesting anything," replied the husky voice in an aggrieved tone. "I merely said it was a damn funny squall. Squalls are damn funny things, some funnier than others. This was a very funny one. And I didn't like the look of the fellar, and he's been the subject of gossip—silly thing to be the subject of gossip. Now, how does one square a triangle? Try a squall, a damn funny, damn local squall!"

"Take him home, Bill," replied the other. "He thinks he's damn funny."

The doctor glanced up quickly and saw several pairs of eyes regarding him nervously. And then he heard some whispering and the group presently departed, noisily but in haste.



The doctor had only just succeeded in holding himself in. "That foul young slanderer," he thought. "What is it that makes humanity so devilish that it loves to insinuate vilely when anything like this happens?" He lay awake for many hours. "Silly thing to be the subject of gossip." That sentence kept recurring to him. What had he meant? Were there many people on the island repeating just that same sort of beastly thing? What was the gossip? Probably just the usual dirty-hearted side-long hinting which even the most innocent companionship of the kind gives rise to. He thought of his niece and her great sorrow, and his blood-pressure rose and kept sleep from him.

Three days later Mrs. Cannon was well enough to make the journey to Bradlaugh Lodge, and from then on her convalescence was gratifyingly rapid. So much so that within a month she had taken a flat in London and therein established herself. After that he received an occasional letter from her which told him little of her doings, but at the beginning of November he got news indeed. She was secretly engaged to Rex Lakeford. It seemed rather soon to announce it, she said, but she would do so before the New Year.

In the meantime, the doctor had almost forgotten that young man's existence; he had, indeed, no inclination to remember it. And now he was

engaged to Dorothea. The doctor made no attempt to pretend to himself that he felt the slightest satisfaction at this prospective union. Why? Well, what did he know of Lakeford? Apparently he had met the Cannons casually in London, and being a keen yachtsman had arranged to go to Bembridge with them for a couple of months. He remembered hearing that he sold motor-cars on commission, a profession that the doctor had never rated very highly. As far as his accent was concerned, he appeared to be an educated person. He had the knack of wearing clothes or, perhaps, of not wearing them out. Of course, he was in no position to judge him, for he had only seen him in the shadow of a shocking catastrophe, and unnerved thereby. Very possibly he was all right. All right for Dorothea? Faced by this question, the doctor realised he had never attempted any serious analysis of his niece's character. In a sense she was still to him the impulsive, and in a way formidable, little girl whom he had taken into his care and provided with governesses and schooling, and to whom he had devoted as much as he could of his scanty leisure. Women to him had always been patients, frightened, in pain, dying; battle-grounds between invading organisms and his therapeutic skill. Never wives, mistresses, temptresses, things which dominated and "made" or ruined men; incalculable forces. Only just a

species of animal which came to him when in trouble.

On the screen of his inner eye was projected Dorothea's image; those restless, impatient dark eyes; hair, thick gold; a nose, a shade too "full" and dominating; her lips a shade too thin, her chin a shade too strong. He had loved his brother Tom, but had never really been on easy terms with Ethel, who had also possessed uncompromising lips and chin. A wheedling bully and inclined to unscrupulousness, though a beautiful and, within her range, intelligent woman. Dorothea took after her. And that was really all he knew about her; she reminded him of her mother, a woman he had instinctively disliked; but he *didn't* dislike Dorothea, though he realised she was almost a complete stranger to him. Otherwise he would not have felt so intensely astonished and disturbed on learning that she was going to marry this Lakeford fellow. Well, it was just something to make the best of, and no business of his. ("A damn funny squall.") That sly insinuation of the young fool at Bembridge recurred to him occasionally, and sometimes with an almost ferocious insistence—its echo pouring through his ears.

During the six days between Christmas and New Year's Eve the doctor's guests had amused themselves in such ways as appealed to them. Mrs.

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## *A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY*

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Cannon and Rex Lakeford, as was natural in the circumstances, chiefly amused themselves by segregating themselves from the rest of the company. Not, thought the doctor, that it appeared greatly to agree with them. Dorothea was restless, inclined to sudden nervous tricks, almost sometimes as if she could see something or hear something not perceptible to anyone else. The doctor's expert eye diagnosed nervous strain or insomnia. As for Rex Lakeford, his appreciation of existence seemed to vary in exact ratio with his distance from alcoholic refreshment. ("None of my business," thought the doctor, uneasily.)

My friend—whose anonymity it is so prudent to maintain—also noticed the rather eccentric manifestations of approaching marital felicity exhibited by those two persons. He, himself, has a stout head and a fearless approach to bottles and tantali, but Lakeford's capacity for "shifting it" filled him with amazement. And Mrs. Cannon's repeated inability to concentrate on what he said to her—and some of his conversation, he assures me, was of a high order—somewhat disconcerted him. But he eventually decided that the union would probably be a happy one, because Lakeford's chat was just the sort of chat which it was better not to concentrate upon.

Dinner on New Year's Eve was a qualified success.

## A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Miss Fender qualified it somewhat, for she was in a talkative and disconnected frame of mind, and inclined to be "psychic"—the doctor had mixed quite testing cocktails and she drank a full glass of champagne in almost record time. In fact, the heightening of the tension, caused by the nervous emanations from the engaged couple, had affected all the others and there was a prevailing sense of unease.

Miss Fender, after a number of over-pertinent and somewhat disconcerting observations, suddenly lifted her second glass of champagne, and looking across at Dorothea and Lakeford said :

"Well, I hope you'll be very happy and your married life be quite free from squalls."

And then there was a sudden silence; Dorothea's face became dead-white and her hands shook; Lakeford's eyes widened and his lower jaw dropped, and he stared across the table at the smiling and benevolent face of Miss Fender.

The doctor did his best to repair the damage caused by the dropping of this characteristic "brick"—the tension relaxed, and presently a tolerable imitation of care-free conversation was re-established. After dinner they played a game of cards, Lakeford's inability to distinguish between hearts and diamonds complicating it somewhat.

And presently the doctor looked at his watch, and finding the time 11.55 led his party down to

## A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

the hall. Dorothea, as the owner of the darkest eyes (and the whitest face), was deputed to let the New Year in. They lined up in the passage from the morning-room to the front door, each with a glass of champagne in the right hand.

It was a wild and streaming night, blowing like the wrath of God, and with a driving deluge from the sou'-west, so the doctor told Dorothea she need not go out but just open the door.

They were ready a few moments before their time, but presently the grandfather clock on the landing began striking solemnly. And when it ceased, Dorothea went forward and opened the door.

And there, on the threshold, was a figure clad in dripping oilskins, its face almost hidden by a sou'-wester. And it started to move forward, and Dorothea screamed and slid along the wall and crumpled to the ground. Rex Lakeford dropped his glass and cried out, "Bob! Bob!" and began flinging out his arms as if to thrust that figure back.

But it was only one of the men from the Coast-guard Station come up to ask the doctor if he could give him something for his mate, who was queer with influenza.



















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